Film Quarterly

Volume 54, Number 2, Winter 2000-01

Radically Empirical Documentary from David and Judith MacDougall

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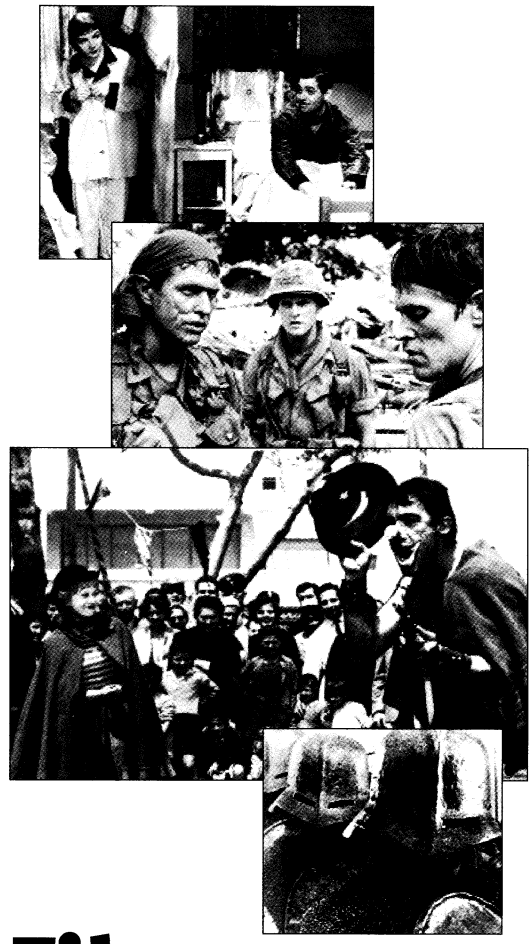

Film Studies at Emory University

EMORY UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL of ARTS & SCIENCES

Film Quarterly

Volume 54, Number 2, Winter 2000–01

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Cover: Robert De Niro in *Guilty By Suspicion* (see page 15); inset: Thora Birch in *American Beauty* (see page 46).

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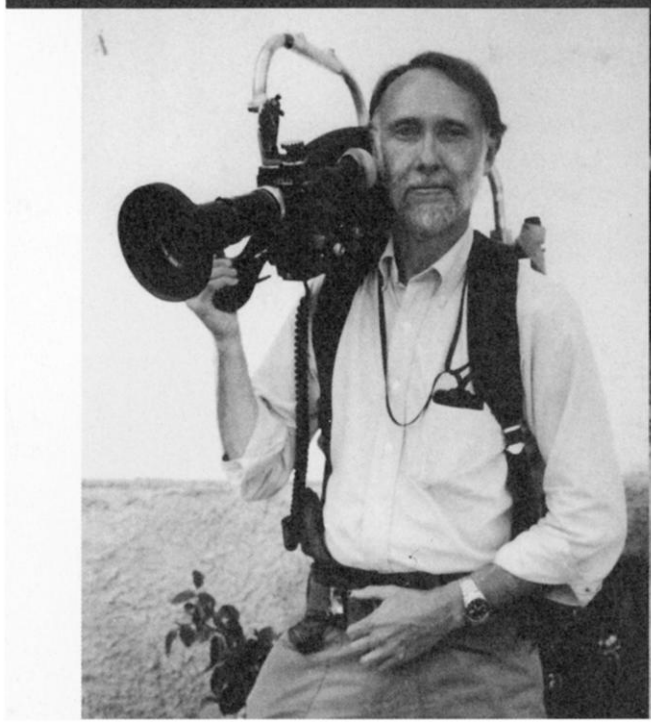
Ilisa Barbash & Lucien Taylor

Radically Empirical Documentary



Making *Tempus de Baristas*

Filming at Collum Collum Station

An Interview with David and Judith MacDougall

Born in the United States but now living in Australia, David and Judith MacDougall trained in filmmaking at UCLA in the late 1960s, married soon after, and have devoted the years since to making more than 20 ethnographic documentaries. More often than not they codirect their films, with Judith MacDougall recording the sound and David the picture. If they are generally considered by anthropologists to be the most significant ethnographic filmmakers in the English-speaking world today, their work is less known in the wider documentary field. However, the rare sensitivity and sheer observational curiosity of their documentary work—and their refusal to bend to the dictates of fashion, be it the highly reflexive or confessional portraits of contemporary independents, or the stock style of broadcast journalism: interviews, "reality" footage, and archival footage—should make it of interest to a much wider community of film scholars.

Most notable of the MacDougalls' early films are two trilogies about pastoral life in newly postcolonial East Africa. Their first trilogy was shot in 1968, among the Jie in the Karamoja district of Uganda. *Nawi* depicts life in a cattle camp, and *Under the Men's Tree* an informal gathering of men crafting various leather objects and talking about motor cars (of which few have any firsthand experience). Shot during a harsh dry season, the feature-length *To Live with Herds*, which won the Grand Prix at the 1972 Venice Film festival, deals more explicitly with the impact of national "development" policies on the Jie, and portrays the rather sour

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relationship that was evolving between them and the local government (which was in significant measure a structural legacy of British "indirect rule").

Shot six years later, in 1974, the MacDougalls' second African trilogy (all feature-length documentaries) was set across the border from Uganda in northwestern Kenya, among the Jie's neighbors and raiders, the Turkana. *The Wedding Camels* follows the fraught negotiation of bridewealth between two families before an upcoming wedding; *Lorang's Way* is a subtle and complex portrait of a self-possessed but vulnerable old man as he reflects on his life and the precarious future of Turkana culture; and *A Wife Among Wives* explores how some Turkana women see marriage and polygamy. These two trilogies were among the first documentaries to translate indigenous dialogue with subtitles rather than dubbed voiceover, thereby retaining the auditory qualities of the original speech and thus allowing foreign viewers to understand subjects speaking an alien language in (as far as possible) their own terms. The technology of subtitling is so much taken for granted nowadays that it is difficult to appreciate just how revolutionary it was at the time in bringing ethnographic subjects alive on the screen as real, reflective, flesh-and-blood human beings. Indeed, subtitles would seem to have been instrumental in convincing many Westerners that non-Westerners *had* intellectual lives at all.

Both trilogies (along with David MacDougall and James Blue's 1974 film, *Kenya Boran*) were very much at an angle to the dominant styles of both documentary and ethnography of the time. Conceived as an organic whole, neither generalising about a discrete culture or society nor restricting themselves to the impersonal abstractions of structural-functionalism (the dominant paradigm in Africanist anthropology of the time), and yet in no way sacrificing attention to larger theoretical issues, the films are distinguished by their perceptive and subtle depiction of moments of social interaction and personal reflection. Quite some time before written anthropology was to follow suit, the MacDougalls were using film to evoke individual embodied experience—the affective, sensory universe inhabited by us all, but which barely makes itself felt in the written monographs of anthropologists. And whereas ethnographic films had previously been predominantly oriented to the documentation of such spectacles as rituals and such processes as the fabrication of material culture, the MacDougalls were concerned rather to penetrate and depict moments of informal social behavior—at first glance, a kind of anti-cinematic subject matter. As David wrote at the time, "The unemphatic

To Live with Herds (below)
Lorang's Way (middle)
A Wife Among Wives (bottom)

situations which interested me were precisely the kind through which most field workers accumulate their understanding of a society, yet which all too rarely make their appearance in finished monographs."

Although almost all of the MacDougalls' films have focused in one way or another on forces of social change and the intergenerational transfer of culture, and many of their African films highlight changes wrought by colonialism and postcolonial "development" policies, they do anything but give us an eagle-eyed view of the political terrain or plot its structural coordinates. Yet they succeed in showing how exogenous political-economic forces manifest themselves in the lives of particular people—not only in their changing world views, but also in their personalities, in their dispositions, in idiosyncratic nuances of behavior.

The MacDougalls' films have also departed from the dominant documentary film style in various ways. Expository documentaries, to get their message, moral, or argument across, tend to resort either to scripted voiceover narration or else to set-up interviews in which people report on their experience after the fact. In the MacDougalls' films, as in observational cinema (Direct and vérité) more broadly, we see people actually living their lives, rather than simply telling us about them, with all the attenuation that entails and affectation it allows. It is not that their subjects pretend that the camera is not there; it's just that for much of the time they're not very interested in it. The MacDougalls have the patience to hang around, equipment in tow, until their subjects actually get bored of them. (Paradoxically, given the relative costs of video and film, such patience, and such an investment in one's subjects, seems even rarer among documentarians today than it was then.)

As observational practices have largely given way to more reflexive and diaristic documentary styles, it is now commonplace to criticize Direct Cinema and vérité for their "macho fetishization" of reality (Tom Waugh) and their illusory "truth-mongering" (B. Ruby Rich), and to point out that all representation is narrated and ineluctably riddled with fictional elements. In an influential 1973 paper, "Beyond Observational Cinema" (included in his recent book of essays, *Transcultural Cinema*), David MacDougall chastized observational purists for their presumptions of objectivity and invisibility, suggesting that "the self-effacement of the filmmaker [may] begin to efface the limitations of his own physicality." He called instead for a participatory practice in which filmmakers engage more actively with the world of their subjects. However, the MacDougalls' own observational style has always been subtly participatory, just as it has always sought to reveal, or expose traces of, its relationship to those realities on the screen which it will be taken to be representing. Unlike some works (and much of the rhetoric) of the observational movement, the MacDougalls' films betray no desire to conceal the filmmakers' presence. In the midst of watching a heated discussion among family or friends, one might suddenly be privy to a snide remark about the filmmakers, a flash of recognition in someone's eyes as they unexpectedly catch sight of the camera and are reminded of its intrusions, or a shift into direct address to the camera that shows a subject to have been aware of it all along.

Most documentaries, even today, are edited in a manner akin to fiction films: the original footage is cut and pasted in the editing room and reassembled into sequences in which shots taken from quite diverse camera angles are adjoined in the name of continuity. But here also begins the slippery slide from documentary *record* to filmic *discourse*, in which fact and fiction comingle, often indiscernibly. Such editing also has the effect of placing the spectator more in the position of a superhuman observer than in a position that actually reflects the optical (or even the subjective) perspective of the filmmaker at the time of filming. The MacDougalls have consistently fought against such mainstream cinematic conventions and have sought instead to develop an "unprivileged camera style," one that preserves long takes and retains within the finished films traces of the original encounters that gave rise to them, and hence provides clues as to the shifting, overdetermined relationship between pro-filmic event and filmic discourse. [Ed. note: See David MacDougall's article in *FQ* vol. 46, no. 2 (Winter 1992-93): "When Less Is Less: The Long Take in Documentary."]

Yet this does not mean that the MacDougalls' films have disregarded the editorial and critical potential of montage. As David has insisted, "Implicit in a camera style is a theory of knowledge." Their films juxtapose shots to a variety of ends—whether to contrast adjacent sequences, to bring out underlying relationships that would otherwise go unremarked, or to hint at the films' relationship to the reality they claim in some way to represent. In fact, at least within the context of anthropology, the MacDougalls' films have been pioneering examples of reflexivity *avant la lettre*, but never in a narcissistic or self-indulgent way. They typically acknowledge, or indicate, the filmmakers' determining presence in a variety of ways—not only with rhetorical textual intertitles, first-person commentary, and still and moving shots of themselves and their para-

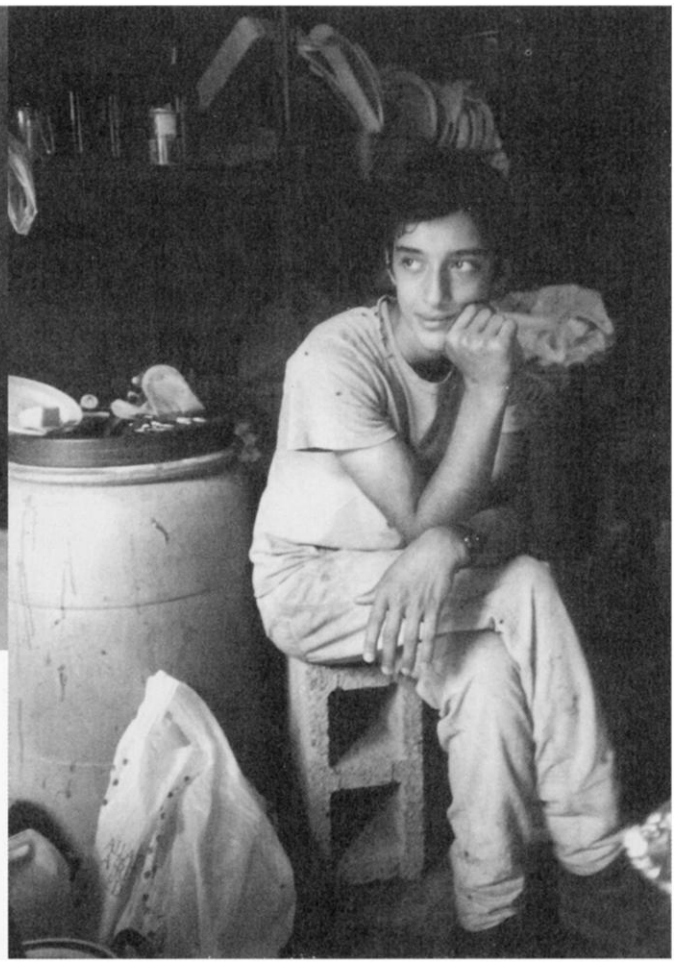


Photo Wallahs (above)
Tempus de Baristas (right)

phernalia, but also by letting us hear their own laconic questions as well as their subjects' responses—in pretty much any way except for the heavy-handed Brechtian baring of the device that has become the stock-in-trade of documentary's "avant-garde." Thus their films lack both the presumption of omniscience of much voiceover-driven documentary and the presumption of objectivity of some observational cinema. In their own terms, their style is as "participatory" as it is observational. Their later films about political resistance and cultural regeneration among Aboriginal Australians (including *Familiar Places* [1980], *The House-Opening* [1980], and *Takeover* [1980]), made partly at the initiative of the communities themselves, were to be more hybrid still—complexly (and at times ambiguously) authored blends of the voices of filmmakers and their subjects. These Australian films are as much works of testament on the subjects' part and advocacy on the filmmakers' part as they are works of documentation pure and simple.

Based since 1975 in Canberra, David and Judith have in the last decade collaborated on a film about photography in Mussoorie, an Indian hill station (*Photo Wallahs* [1991]). Additionally, David has directed an almost lyrical feature-length film about three Sardinian shepherds facing an uncertain future (*Tempus de Baristas* [1993]), and a digital video (the first in a series) of astonishing intimacy about student sociality at India's elite Doon School (*Doon School Chronicles* [2000]). And Judith has recently completed *Diyas* (2000), a digital video that traces the life history of a particular Indian terracotta oil lamp (a *diya*) from its creation on a potter's wheel through its sale as a commodity and its ritual use in the Hindu Diwali festival of lights to its return to the earth from which it began.

However, while visual anthropology, and "visuality" in general, has recently become the subject of increasing academic attention—with, for example, W.J.T. Mitchell heralding an emergent "visual moment" or "pictorial turn" in the humanities and social sciences more broadly—the MacDougalls' work remains in many ways a countercurrent to today's filmic and anthropological trends. Far from conceiving of ethnographic films as merely illustrative of or in any simple

way analogous to written ethnography, the MacDougalls believe that ethnography itself can be conduced filmically—not in opposition to writing but neither as an afterthought to it, nor for mere record-making purposes; rather, in such a way that the films themselves embody all the interpretive complexity that ideally lies at the heart of anthropology itself. More to the point, the MacDougalls' body of films already exemplifies what they propose. In an age of narcissistic self-fashioned confession and glib invocations of postmodernism and reflexivity, their oeuvre displays a deep commitment, marked equally by humility and curiosity, to representing the authentic lived experience of their subjects in a wide variety of cultural settings. It is an approach that, in its attachment to the immanence and the flux of experience, one is inclined to call, after William James, "radically empirical." But unlike much of the phenomenological tradition, the MacDougalls' films, with their scrupulous attention (as much visual, in the end, as aural) to the dialogue of their subjects, never allow one to forget that reflecting on one's life (and its relationship to others) is part and parcel of actually living it.

LUCIEN TAYLOR: *All your films seem to be about relationships between people, and relationships, while they are "visible" in certain concrete manifestations, are not inherently "visual." Could you talk a little about the relationship between the visible and invisible in your films?*

DAVID MACDOUGALL: I've always felt that documentary and ethnographic film are *principally* about the nonvisible, and that it's only a very narrow conception of documentary that assumes it stops at the visible record. But there is a significant difference in how one proceeds from the visible to the nonvisible. It seems to me there are two directions one can take. One can either treat documentary as a medium that registers the visible surface of life and produces an artifact in which it's then possible to see the signs of a whole cosmos of underlying beliefs and cultural patterns, or one can treat it as a medium that engages with the experience and imagination of the viewer *through* the evocative power of the visible. One attitude treats the film as an object which the viewer is able to inspect in a disinterested way from a distance. The other treats the film as an event in the life of the viewer, a work created in time and space, acting upon our intelligence and emotions. It's this performative aspect of cinema that is often ignored when film *as film* is taken out of its viewing context. And unfortunately many social scientists have a tendency to consider film simply as a text. This has the effect of stripping the film of its internal logic, of making the film no more than the sum of its parts, whereas in fact the importance of many films lies not in the parts but in the network of resonances set up between them.

In a sense, films are extended metaphors of the invisible. When it's said that film is an indexical medium, that doesn't only mean that its signs are physically linked to the world, it also means that it evokes the physical world through its traces, its indices. The slightest trace is sometimes enough to recreate an object or person or place. Films actually give us extraordinarily little out of which to reconstruct their subjects. Films also provide us with the same sorts of indices that we are used to interpreting in daily life—facial expressions that stand for inner feelings, sounds that tell us of things around us, objects associated with certain ways of life, and so on. It's often very hard in both life and films to distinguish between the physical and the emotional, or the visible and invisible. Is anger simply an emotion, or is it physical behavior? When we admire or love or hate someone, can we separate who they are from their physical embodiment?

In making films I'm rarely conscious of evocation per se. Rather, I'm seizing upon things that are already expressive, the world speaking itself, as it were. Before I made *Tempus de Baristas*, I made some preliminary notes, including one that said, "Film people's hands." But by the time I began filming I had completely forgotten that, yet the film is full of hands. I filmed hands not as signs or symbols, nor because they belonged to certain people—but because literally they *were* those people. When I was filming *Doon School Chronicles* I found to my surprise that I was filming feet and legs more than hands. This started as an attempt to evoke the initial impact upon me of 500 anonymous Indian schoolboys, but also to indicate the small differences that soon began to mark them out as individuals. This was obvious enough with faces, but the variety of legs, shoes, sandals, and stockings in fact also expressed a good deal about differences of age, physique, and character among the boys. I also realized as I went along that feet and legs were an important part of school rituals and regimentation, of which marching is perhaps the most obvious example. Shoes were a particular focus of discipline, for unpolished shoes were frequently an occasion for punishment.

I would also suggest that the anthropologist or ethnographic filmmaker involved in fieldwork is not conscious of a single, continuous personal identity. Our sense of self is constantly ebbing and flowing—

sometimes quite apart and autonomous, at other times merging with the experience of others. Our filming can reflect this. I think it is often through physical objects, and through our proximity to the physicality of others, that we have an intimation of a different sense of self. Through the visual, film plays upon this possibility, bringing us closer to the experiential world of others.

JUDITH MACDOUGALL: A filmmaker's "language" is not so much one of images *plus* sounds, but one in which we read various kinds of perceptual information simultaneously. We "see" films in a way similar to the way we experience life; we are not making complete sense of it before we move on to the next moment. When we have a conversation with someone, we are not separating what we see (gesture, facial expression, and so on) from what we hear (including the spaces between words and most importantly, what is *not* said) as we move through the experience. Only later do we say, "Well, John said . . ." and then we usually are reporting not what John said literally, as in a transcript, but what we think he *meant*.

For this reason, as a film answers questions, it simultaneously raises further questions. For some viewers this can create a kind of paralysis, or vertigo, and they can't proceed with the film. Perhaps the question of distance is crucial. If one suffers from vertigo (as I do), movement is possible only with the realization that leaning out over the abyss allows progress, and that attempting to cling to the rockface makes one fall. Seeing a film is the same: if we look too hard, we lose it, as we also do if we attempt to hover over it as a disembodied observer. Part of how we engage with film involves emotions, and these can't be disassociated from the whole any more than sight or hearing can be. Film creates a lived sort of knowledge rather than the abstract schematization that written knowledge allows, and that's both its strength and weakness. The qualities of understanding differ in a manner similar to the way one's knowledge of living in a village differs from knowledge based on maps, demographic detail, and lists of buildings. The problem lies not with any art/science dichotomy, but in deciding what types of knowledge are pertinent to one's activities.

In a sense, films are extended metaphors of the invisible.

ILISA BARBASH: *I know that you see your latest film,* Doon School Chronicles, *as an exploration of the "social aesthetics" of the school. Can you talk a little about what exactly you mean by that?*

DM: I use the term "social aesthetics" for want of a better term. I mean by it that part of our social experience that involves our senses and aesthetic sensibilities, apart from any specific considerations of art or beauty. In fact, it often includes aspects of our surroundings that we find humdrum, or painful, or ugly, but which nevertheless exert a powerful influence upon us. Every society, I believe, develops its own distinctive sensory profile—in its material environment, its rituals, and the special qualities it imparts to human relations, and this becomes an important factor in people's emotional lives and the judgements they make. This is especially pronounced in small, consciously designed societies such as schools, religious orders, and military organizations, which place great emphasis upon form and appearance. I thought Doon School might be a good place to explore the sensory and formal qualities of social life. The best ethnographic films have perhaps always dealt implicitly with this subject.

In the first film I pay particular attention to certain physical aspects of the school involving clothing, punishments, and public rituals. These are deeply connected with the aesthetics of power, masculinity, and childhood. In the other films I am now editing I look more at the routine course of social life for a few people. One conceptual key to social aesthetics for me was the phenomenon of homesickness and its counterpart, what the students themselves call "schoolsickness"—the pain of parting from familiar surroundings and a way of life.

IB: *In cross-cultural films, do you think there are specific problems that revolve around the issue of translation? Are they different in kind from those inherent in written ethnography and from those involving all documentary films?*

JM: I think the major challenge in making observational films in unfamiliar cultures is not so much one of "translation" as one of creating an environment that allows viewers room to interpret the behavior of people operating within a very different social system. Yes, the problems are different in kind from those in written anthropology, and one must counter the expectations of those who expect a didactic essay. The hardest thing in the filmmaking process is to determine exactly how much manipulation and intervention is needed to ensure a reasonably accurate interpretation and yet never to "tell" too much. Constructing the beginning of a film is especially tricky because one tries to set up the themes, characters, and style, yet viewers should

also be able to bring their own interpretations to it. Exposition without ambiguity can raise false expectations. Any hint of the familiar formulaic didactic style can cause the viewer to immediately suspend all mental activity and expect to be told everything, and then if such explicitness is not forthcoming, an audience can become quite cross.

LT: *Your Jie and Turkana films are often credited with having been among the first to individualize and humanize their subjects by subtitling their dialogue and allowing viewers to perceive their intellectual life. How do you feel about subtitles today?*
DM: Subtitles have their own dynamics. For example, they present us with speech in segments, not in the flow that actually characterizes speech. They also reach into the film and pull out a particular level of meaning. When a dog barks, the subtitles ignore it. Subtitled films exaggerate the importance of speech in social life. That is part of the price we pay for them. They tend to take over, so that even if other things are really more important, such as how people speak rather than what they say, you have to keep the subtitles going or the audience will think something has gone wrong. Subtitles were almost a logical requirement of making films in synchronous sound in another language, because obviously audiences wanted to know what people were saying. Together with synchronous sound, they changed the whole orientation of ethnographic film from an emphasis upon ritual and technology and general surveys of culture to an emphasis upon speech, whether in interviews or spontaneous conversations, and upon specific people and events. I think this change has been worthwhile, but I also think it is time to try to get away from the excessively verbal. I think we need to explore sound as environment. I think we need to make films about relationships expressed nonverbally, and the many times in life when people are alone.

I think we need to make films about relationships expressed nonverbally, and the many times in life when people are alone.

IB: *Many of your films seem laconic, minimalist almost, relaxed . . . are you conscious of any fit between your film style and your own personalities? Once we admit the role of the author in ethnographic films, where does this leave the subjects? And does it even make sense to imagine synchronizing film form with cultural style?*
DM: Although our style has changed over time, I suppose there is some underlying consistency. Part of it is no doubt due to our working method, rather than to our individual personalities. We encourage a relaxed, undemanding atmosphere while we're filming, mingling our filming activities as much as possible with our ongoing interchanges with people. On the other hand, there may be aspects of Judith's outgoing relationships with people and my fondness for understatement apparent in our work. We don't necessarily feel relaxed when we're filming. I am often on tenterhooks, on the alert for particular themes and relationships, or desperately waiting for something to emerge in front of the camera. I constantly reexamine the analytical basis and the structures of the film in my mind. I feel frustrated and elated by turns. I am often irritated and angry with myself, for opportunities missed, or when I feel I've shot something badly. I don't really enjoy the technology of filming per se. I regard it as a necessary tool, although my camera does become for me a very sensitive, personal instrument. On a good day I sense an extraordinary synchrony between what I'm seeing and how I'm filming it, almost as if life were arranging itself artfully for me. I often have a feeling of love and admiration for the people I'm looking at through the viewfinder, a sense of their perfection, mixed with a certain sadness I can't quite account for. These are all perhaps factors in the style of the films.

I constantly feel the need to simplify, to get rid of a lot of the unnecessary baggage of film. I do fight against the easy aestheticization of film images. It's not hard to get beautiful images—anyone can learn to do it. But it's usually irrelevant, and it shouldn't be allowed to get in the way of the subject. There's a fundamental difference between conventionally beautiful images and a filmmaker responding sensitively to people and places and things—that is, the impression we get of balance and understanding. The framing of images should be a reflection of thought and feeling. I don't know how we can create film styles more appropriate to different cultural styles. Perhaps we should reexamine certain potentials of film in the light of cultural practices—the use of repetition, for example. Otherwise, I think we have to work through an intuitive sense of what's appropriate.

On the more general question of the fit between film style and the subject, I think we're always bound to some extent by the conventions and technology of our time. The forms and rhetoric of filmmaking convey some aspects of social experience much better than others. For example, I don't think we know very well how to deal with the passage of time in films. There's

a tendency to impose a heightened pace, to distrust one's subject matter. It's often shortening that takes the meaning out of things that would otherwise be interesting. It became clear, for example, that the scene of Miminu making cheese in *Tempus de Baristas* would only work if it were kept long, otherwise it would be merely a technological process. But kept long, it begins to communicate a sense of Miminu's solitary life, and his internalization of the details of his work. For me, when the cheese appears it's like a moment of creation, the beginning of a new world.

LT: *Stylistic differences in your oeuvre seem to coincide with cultural, even continental differences: the Turkana and Jie films, the Australian films, and* Photo Wallahs *in India, all with markedly different styles. To what extent was this experimentation on your part? To what extent was it forced upon you by the cultural differences with which you were confronted?*

DM: I think for us stylistic differences have been partly forced upon us and are partly the result of exploring new possibilities. They've been forced upon us by the fact that the same style isn't always productive for all subjects. There may be dissonances between a particular documentary style and a particular cultural style. The clearest instance was in Australia, where we found that the style we had used in pastoralist societies in East Africa simply wasn't appropriate in Aboriginal society. People had a wholly different way of expressing themselves, and if the film was to be attuned to that, it had to be made differently. In fact, those films can be seen as a series of attempts to find satisfactory ways of representing Aboriginal culture. I'm not sure we were ever really successful.

The same style isn't always productive for all subjects. There may be dissonances between a particular documentary style and a particular cultural style.

JM: Although some of the stylistic choices must occur at the shooting stage, the decisions made during editing create the frame through which filming style is often interpreted. Much of the time spent editing an observational film involves juggling and balancing context and content, and we spend quite a long time in the editing process, certainly compared to many television documentaries. Editing this sort of film is like walking on a tightrope while juggling a dozen balls while singing, and it all can cataclysmically crash if the balance goes just a little bit wrong. Observational films using long takes are especially difficult to structure because once the rhythms of real time establish themselves as the normal pattern, condensation often can only be achieved by omitting content. It is difficult to ensure a preferred reading for a complex and extended long take containing several characters and diverse subject matter, and it is even more difficult when cultural difference obscures meaning. The Turkana films were able to sustain narrative by employing disjunctive intertitles and first-person narration, but the Australian films seemed to require a less disruptive style, and interior commentary provided that. Every film represents a new set of parameters and pathways which must be articulated into a meaningful narrative, and cultural differences are just one part of the equation.

LT: *Do you consider yourselves observational filmmakers through and through? Would you ever make much use of archival footage and re-enactments, or stylized hybrids blending fact and fiction, or more autobiographical or diaristic films?*

JM: I'd consider doing any of the things you mention, but one can't separate style or structural strategies from appropriateness to the filmic situation. A part of what makes filmmaking so demanding is the effort it takes to retain an open mind while making decisions that preclude certain possibilities. For example, a film I'd conceptualised as requiring my first-person commentary might take on a different point of view, and be narrated by one of the main characters in the film. A situation that seemed to demand archival footage can suddenly change into one where people spontaneously choose to reenact their history, and this might be much more interesting. While filming in an unobtrusive observational manner, one might suddenly need to step into the scene. Probably new technology makes stylistic hybrids inevitable, and we'll be the richer for this; but there's an advantage to simplicity as well.

DM: I'm quite open to the possibility of doing things differently in the future. For example, I'm not opposed to using narration, only to using it in certain shop-worn ways. In fact, we've used narration in a number of our films. I think it's also a mistake to jump to conclusions about a film on the basis of certain stylistic features. A film such as *Tempus de Baristas* may look superficially very much like a traditional observational film simply because it doesn't declare the filmmaker's presence overtly. But I believe it's fundamentally different in approach to observational films, and that the presence of the filmmaker can be felt in it in all sorts of other ways if one really understands the film.

IB: *In David's* Doon School Chronicles *there are further departures from an observational style: still photo montages; the structuring of the film into chapters, each announced with an epigraph; and long close-ups of objects or body parts. Can you talk a little about this?*
DM: In many respects the film is about the tension between uniformity and individuality: this is announced in the opening sequences of the film, with the empty uniforms and anonymous legs and bodies gradually being filled by individuals. In taking the school as my subject, I felt I had to deal with it both abstractly and with some intimacy. The stills and quotations from school documents are part of the process of abstraction. They make us step back from the school and regard it from a greater distance, and sometimes with irony. At the same time, I hope that the emphasis on material objects brings us closer to the physical reality of being at the school, and the immediate experience of the students. I don't think that an observational style alone would have accomplished this.

LT: *Observational and vérité films seem to have given way, both in the mainstream and within the independent community, to interview-based films. How do you feel about the shift? Do interview-based films really provide the context that some viewers felt to be lacking in observational films?*
JM: I think the shift from observational material to interview material has more to do with changes in technology and changing economic realities than it does with an intentional modification of filmmaking methodology or philosophy. Shooting interviews on video is cheap, easy, and quick, and shooting observational material, even on tape, is enormously time-consuming and thus expensive. Observational footage has been replaced by "reality" footage authenticated by interview. Reality footage is also comparatively inexpensive because it usually depicts public events which fall into familiar categories, such as political events, disasters, and so on, and thus it can exist as a simple metonym which requires little interior contextualization. I worry that because this sort of journalistic practice has almost completely replaced older, more open, film forms, the expectations of viewers who have never seen a "documentary" are becoming very restricted. The preconceptions which bias interpretation are a crucial part of the process of mediation; for example, a viewer perceives a film very differently when it is seen on a television monitor as part of an academic seminar than when it's projected in a theater. And even though popular literature and television has developed the curious inversion of nonfiction viewed as entertainment (*Cops*, *Funniest Home Video*, etc.) and fiction is consumed as information (James Clavell's *Rising Sun* or the feature film *JFK*), there is a tendency, especially in academic circles, to equate nonfiction with information.
DM: I have considerable reservations about interview-based films. But one great potential of television, I think, is to allow us to watch and listen to people talking. We can get a real insight into a person's ideas and character through such material—for example, in Rolf Husmann, Peter Loizos, and Werner Sperschneider's film on Raymond Firth, in Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick's film on Noam Chomsky, and in Terry Zwigoff's on Robert Crumb. Unfortunately this approach is very rare on television. There's a tendency *not* to want us to watch and listen, but rather to manipulate fragments of speech.

There are many questions about the self-validation of interview-based films, and Bill Nichols has written about this. Certainly they're an effective and tempting form of propaganda, because filmmakers have only to include the sentiments they agree with. Also it's terribly seductive just to sit back and be told things by people who supposedly know, and who promise a kind of behind-the-scenes view of history. But there's incredible confusion these days between television journalism and documentary. People simply don't know the difference. Interview-based films are always, on one level, retrospective and second-hand. They *report on* experience, they don't use film to confront us with experience, except as people look back upon it. Somehow these films are evasive: they don't really come to grips with film as a medium for engaging with life as it is lived—what Edgar Morin called the work of the *cinéaste-plongeur*, who dives into life. They have a prefabricated quality, which of course is what television executives love about them. You propose an idea and then go around and collect interviews and archival footage. But it's sad to see young filmmakers going out to make a documentary and all they can think of to do is sit people down and interview them.

LT: *How do you go about choosing a "subject" for your films? Do you focus on a "theme"? Do you select or "cast" your subjects?*
DM: There are several considerations. One is how well a situation brings certain underlying issues to the surface. Another is how people embody those issues in their lives, and how expressive they are about them. Filmmakers are attracted to certain people for a variety of reasons—for the position they occupy sociologically, for the problems they exemplify, for their intelligence and other qualities, their attitudes toward

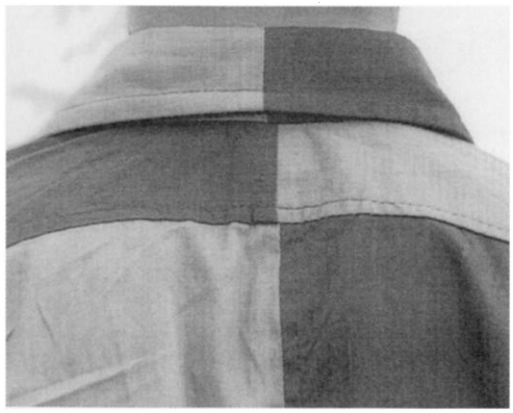
Doon School Chronicles

life, their expressiveness, their skillfulness, their appearance or bearing. Undoubtedly we are often drawn to exceptional people, which may result in ethnographic films being skewed away from the norm, but I think this occurs in most anthropological fieldwork. At the same time, these people often sum up significant aspects of their society and are eloquent about it.

While I was shooting the Doon School films I felt that in some ways the major protagonists were "casting" themselves. Certain boys stood out from the crowd because of some special aspect of their activities or character. One boy was so remarkably expressive in everything he did that I always felt he could easily have made a career as a child actor. But I was also looking for a certain pattern of representative students. In *Doon School Chronicles* I focused on a group of four boys who shared a room together but differed greatly in background and personality. I also chose two others, a younger boy who was making a success of school life in very conventional ways, and an older one who had always challenged the conventions of the school and was making a success of his life there on his own terms.

LT: *All your films are distinguished by your manifest presence, interacting variously, if usually laconically and subtly, with the pro-filmic world we see on the screen. How has your orientation to reflexivity changed over the course of your work?*

DM: Reflexivity at one time was at the center of our enterprise, because we were making films that were explicitly epistemological. Whatever their other subjects, they were about how films represent knowledge, and what sorts of knowledge were available to filmmakers. It was also important to remind audiences that films come about through the agency of filmmakers, not the gods. There was always the danger, though, that the



Doon School Chronicles

self-reflexive stance would be taken as a stamp of authenticity—that because we acknowledged the constraints upon our view, that view would be more completely believed. In effect, self-reflexivity tended to be crudely interpreted as erecting a structure of explanation around one's work to legitimate it. This nurtured the naïve positivist view that science really could describe external reality accurately if all the filters of subjectivity were identified and done away with. It completely missed the point that we know things through ourselves, and that you can't simply eliminate the self in the pursuit of knowledge.

For me, reflexivity now means something rather different. It's something inscribed in the work at a deeper level. To understand the relation of the filmmaker to the subject, you have to engage with the film more imaginatively. The presence of the filmmaker, and the quality of the filmmaker's relation to the subject, permeates a good film. It is evident in the nuances of camera movement, in the framing, in what the filmmaker selects at any given moment, in the pace of the film, its themes and ideas, and how people behave before the camera. It lies in many things that the filmmaker would be unable to identify precisely, because the filmmaker is too intimately involved. This suggests that the filmmaker may not be the best person to define for the viewer the terms in which the film should be read. These must be read in the film itself.

The presence of the filmmaker, and the quality of the filmmaker's relation to the subject, permeates a good film.

JM: The problem of how to include the author as a solid, real presence is similar in both written and visual media, in that an extra body requires additional *space*, and generally the vehicle can only hold so many bodies. It is in the nature of texts that space is time, and they can only go on for so long, and usually it takes quite a long time to deal with the complexities of exotic others doing strange things in alien cultures. The more the author appears as a real body, the more he/she also needs explanation. I am often derailed when I read some of the recent ethnographies because I am always stopping to wonder where the author went to school or how old she is and who her parents were, and so on. When we create narratives with characters who are *real people*, and not fictional ones, we are faced with the basic limitations of the medium we're working in; it's a difficult problem. It has often been suggested that multimedia will alleviate these space/time limitations, but I think we'll always need freestanding texts, the product of our analytical and creative energy, however imperfect these might be.

LT: *Would you be as quick as Jean Rouch to say that "There is almost no boundary between documentary film and films of fiction"?*

DM: I would not be nearly as quick to say that. The boundary may indeed be vague, but that doesn't mean there is no difference on either side of it. The actors in fiction films are real people, but does that make all fiction films documentary? I'd like to preserve the distinction, for two reasons. I agree with Bill Nichols that there is a fundamental difference between films about living people, who belong to the world regardless of any film that might be made about them, and people imagined by a scriptwriter and played by actors. There is far more to the person in documentary than what one films, but there is no more to a fictional character than what is in the film, however richly it is evoked. Secondly, documentary filmmaking is for me importantly a way of making contact with the world, of sensing and declaring the existence of things, whereas fiction would seem to be a way of adding to the world in its own image. I have to admit, though, that Bresson is a great filmmaker for me precisely because he reaches beyond the fictional. He is working in Rouch's borderland.

LT: *Who has made up your audiences over the years? Do you make films explicitly for multiple audiences?*

JM: I always have felt very much like Edgar Morin, who says in the last scene of *Chronique d'un été*, "I thought everybody would find the film sympathetic; now I see people I'm fond of, like Marilou and Marceline quarrelling [over it]. That upsets me. I assumed audiences would like the people I liked."

DM: I have never been happy with the idea of making films for a "target audience." Once a film is made, it may have any number of audiences, and in the future many that were never anticipated. Much of what people see in a film is the result of what they bring to it, and each viewer in effect sees a different film. If a film is sufficiently rich and complex, I believe it will have meaning for a variety of viewers, or perhaps rather, give them the materials to make meaning. Education has little to do with it. I've observed several times that films of ours which highly educated audiences found "difficult" made perfect sense to less educated audiences.

Recently, I've felt increasingly that the most important audience for a film is the people in it. But of course you make a film for other people too. And you make it for itself, to bring it into being.

IB: *David's* Doon School Chronicles *and Judith's* Diyas *are your first works in video. Has working in video has affected your respective filmmaking styles in any way?*
DM: Video has affected the way I work, but I would not say fundamentally. Rather, it has given me a new freedom to experiment and, in a sense, to develop the intuitive side of my filmmaking. Part of this comes from working alone, which is easier in video than in film. Working alone, you can act on impulse more easily, try out new things, and take more risks. For example, I have begun to incorporate stills into my sequences. Other consequences of working in video have been more unexpected. You would think that video would make you less attentive to the image, but for me it has been quite the opposite. If anything, I am more conscious of the qualities of the image, and visual imagery plays a more important part in my work, than ever before. This may be because with video you avoid the constant technical distractions you face when using film, and you can see immediately what you have shot. It's like shifting from working in marble to working in clay. On the other hand, you have to be careful to maintain your discipline as a filmmaker—not to shoot a lot in the hope that you can make something out of it later. You have to think just as clearly and analytically as before.
JM: I've only attempted one film on small format digital video and it's not quite finished. But yes, it has radically changed my approach to making whatever we are calling these new things . . . "Films"? "Videos"? "Dijies"? The portability of the gear is liberating, exhilarating. When we went to India to shoot *Photo Wallahs* we took 265 kilos of camera gear in dozens of cases. Every bit of it had to be accounted for to numerous officials. It was a logistical nightmare. My recent digital video production in India was an "experiment" to see how I felt about shooting again after 30 years and also to see how the mini-DV held up physically. It was a joy right from the first day. I carried my whole production kit in a locally purchased imitation leather bag not much bigger than a ladies' handbag. I could hop onto public transport or the back of a motor bike. Problems created by the camera's lack of a decent viewfinder and some irritating auto features were minimized because most filming was out of doors, and I could count on the depth of field to keep things in focus. The low cost of videotape meant that I felt I could take chances, try difficult shots, gamble on trying to predict what would happen next.

Postproduction for *Diyas* has been a much more mixed experience. I'd hoped to experiment more with compositing and animation, but it's nearing completion and I'll probably have to wait until my next film. At the same time, I have to admit that digital video straight-cuts editing is so easy, and the ability to incorporate titles, text, and stills at any stage is a huge advantage. Rough subtitling allows one to show the film before completion without having to talk over all the dialogue scenes. So I have a rather love/hate relationship with the new technology. Although *Diyas* will basically remain an observational-style film, I'm attempting a few new narrative strategies made possible by the new technology. I hope in the next film I can try out more complex approaches.

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Selected Films by David MacDougall and Judith MacDougall

All films are codirected by David and Judith MacDougall, unless otherwise noted. The first date indicates the year of filming, the second the year of release. Distributors for the films are represented by the capital letters at the end of each listing; names and addresses of distributors are listed at the end.

Films in Africa

Nawi
1988/1970 David MacDougall, dir. Migration to and life in a cattle camp of the Jie of Uganda. 20 minutes. Distribution: C

To Live with Herds
1968/1972 David MacDougall, dir. The impact of development policies upon the pastoral Jie of Uganda during a period of drought. 70 minutes. Distribution: C, G, RA

Under the Men's Tree
1968/1974 David MacDougall, dir. Jie men make leather items while discussing motor cars and other matters. 15 minutes. Distribution: C

Kenya Boran
1972/1974 David MacDougall and James Blue, dir. Two boys and their fathers confront social and economic change in northern Kenya. 66 minutes. Distribution: D

The Wedding Camels
1974/1977 A wedding among the pastoral Turkana of northwestern Kenya. 108 minutes. Distribution: C, RA, RO

Lorang's Way
1974/1979 A Turkana man and the forces that have made him what he is. 70 minutes. Distribution: C, RA, RO

A Wife Among Wives
1974/1981 A disputed marriage and an enquiry into marriage and polygamy among the Turkana. 75 minutes. Distribution: C, RA, RO

Films in Australia

Good-Bye Old Man
1975/1977 David MacDougall, dir. A pukumani ceremony of the Tiwi of Melville Island, northern Australia. 70 minutes. Distribution: A, RA

To Get That Country
1977/1978 David MacDougall, dir. A film witnessing early moments in the formation of the Northern Land Council, the first legally sanctioned Aboriginal land claims organization in Australia. 70 minutes. Distribution: A

Familiar Places
1977/1980 David MacDougall, dir. A white Australian anthropologist accompanies Aboriginal families to map their clan territories in northern Queensland. 53 minutes. Distribution: A, C, RA

The House-Opening
1977/1980 Judith MacDougall, dir. The Aborigines of Aurukun in northern Queensland combine traditional Aboriginal, Torres Strait Island, and European cultural elements in a new ceremony. 45 minutes. Distribution: A, C, RA

Takeover
1978/1980 The state-federal confrontation over Aboriginal rights at Aurukun in March 1978. 90 minutes. Distribution: A, C, RA

Three Horsemen
1978/1982 An old Aboriginal stockman, his nephew, and his 13-year-old grandnephew on Cape York peninsula, northern Queensland, try to get an old cattle station going again in their traditional clan country. 54 minutes. Distribution: A, C, RA

Stockman's Strategy
1982/1984 An Aboriginal stockman in northern New South Wales trains a young apprentice and discusses his philosophy of teaching and learning. 54 minutes. Distribution: A, RA

Collum Calling Canberra
1982/1984 Two Aboriginal men steer their way through the often frustrating processes of official decision-making as they attempt to turn Collum Collum Station into a self-supporting enterprise. 58 minutes. Distribution: A, RA

Sunny and the Dark Horse
1982/1986 A family's passion for "picnic racing" in northern New South Wales. 85 minutes. Distribution: A

A Transfer of Power
1982/1986 Replacing an old car engine at Collum Collum Station. 22 minutes. Distribution: A

Link-Up Diary
1986/1987 David MacDougall, dir. A week in the work of Link-Up, an organization that reunites Australian Aboriginal families forcibly split up under state "welfare" policies. 86 minutes. Distribution: A, RA

Other Films

Indians and Chiefs
1967/1972 Judith MacDougall, dir. Native Americans in Los Angeles. 40 minutes. Distribution: C

Photo Wallahs
1988/1991 An encounter with photography and local Indian photographers in Mussoorie, a hill station in the foothills of the Himalayas. 60 minutes. Distribution: C, RA, RO

Tempus de Baristas (Time of the Barmen)
1992/1993 David MacDougall, dir. A portrait of three mountain shepherds of Sardinia. 100 minutes. Distribution: G, I, C, RA, RO

Doon School Chronicles
1997-98/2000 David MacDougall, dir. An intimate study of India's most prestigious boys' boarding school, which since Independence has come to epitomize many aspects of Indian postcoloniality. 140 minutes. Distribution: C, RA, RO

Diyas
1997/2000 Judith MacDougall, dir. The "life history" of a *diya*, a small oil lamp, and the lives of the people who surround it at the time of the Hindu festival of Diwali. 56 minutes. Distribution: RO

Distributors

A Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, P.O. Box 553, Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia. Tel. (02) 6246 1111. Fax (02) 6249 7310. Email: *sales@aiatsis.gov.au*. Website: *http://www./aiatsis.gov.au*. Video and film sales.

C Center for Media and Independent Learning, University of California Extension, 2000 Center Street, Fourth floor, Berkeley, CA 94704, U.S.A. Tel. 510 642 0460. Fax. 510 643 9271. Email: *cmil@uclink.berkeley.edu*. Website: *http://www-cmil.unex.berkeley.edu/media/*. Video and film sales and rentals.

D Documentary Educational Resources, 101 Morse Street, Watertown, MA 02172, U.S.A. Tel. 617 926 0491. Fax. 617 926 9519. Email: *docued@der.org*. Website: *http://www.xensei.com/docued/*. Video and film sales.

G Institut für Wissenschaftlichen Film, Nonnenstieg 72, D-37075 Göttingen, Germany. Tel. (49) 551 50 24 301. Fax. (49) 551 50 24 400. Email: *iwf-goe@iwf.de*. Website: *http://www.iwf.gwdg.de/*. Film rentals.

I Instituto Superiore Regionale Etnografico, Via A. Mereu 56, 08100 Nuoro, Italy. Fax. (39) 784 37484. Email: *isrenuoro@interbusiness.it*. Video and film sales.

RA Royal Anthropological Institute, 50 Fitzroy Street, London W1P 6HS, Great Britain. Tel. (44) 207 387 0455. Fax. (44) 171 383 4235. email: *rai@cix.compulink.co.uk*. Website: *http://rai.anthropology.org.uk*. Video sales; film and video rentals.

RO Ronin Films, Cinema Centre Building, Bunda Street, Canberra ACT 2600, Australia. Tel. (02) 6248 0851. Fax (02) 6249 1640. Email: *admin@roninfilms.com.au*. Website: *http://www.roninfilms.com.au/*. Video and film sales.

Thanks to David and Judith MacDougall for providing the photos for this interview.

Jeanne Hall

The Benefits of Hindsight

Re-Visions of HUAC and the Film and Television Industries in *The Front* and *Guilty By Suspicion*

Robert De Niro in *Guilty By Suspicion*

I think some critics were offended by *The Front* because it shows that some people who are accused of being Communists are simple, dignified, ordinary people.[1]

—Lester Cole, 1976

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If [*Guilty By Suspicion*] was about a Communist, the end result would be perceived as a defense of Communism. . . . Someone else can make a movie about a Communist.[2]

—Irwin Winkler, 1991

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Stories of Hollywood and the blacklist have been told often, though rarely on the silver screen for which those most affected labored. The chilling effects of the investigations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) into the U.S. film and broadcast industries in the late 1940s and early 1950s have been the subject of numerous articles, pamphlets, dissertations, and books, as well as radio and television productions. But the film industry itself—perhaps not surprisingly, though one can imagine a myriad of revisions—has rather studiously avoided the subject. *The Front* (Martin Ritt, 1976) and *Guilty By Suspicion* (Irwin Winkler, 1991) are two of the most notable exceptions.

Although *The Front* is a comedy set in the fledgling television industry on the East Coast and *Guilty By Suspicion* is a drama set in the beleaguered motion picture industry on the West Coast, textual and contextual similarities between the two works provide a solid basis for comparison. Both films feature representations of, allusions to, or composites of historical figures. Both films also feature actual blacklist victims in key creative roles. Perhaps most importantly for my purposes here, neither film is an isolated incidence of Cold War revisionism. Rather, each can be seen as part of two flurries of blacklist "nostalgia" which occurred in the mid-1970s and the early 1990s, respectively.

Although both films are ostensibly "about" the McCarthy era, they are best understood in relation to the Nixon/Carter and Reagan/Bush periods in which they were produced and consumed. Within certain predictable limits, as Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner have shown, popular films of the late 1960s and early 1970s "debate significant social issues, and many, operating from a left-liberal perspective, attempt to use traditional representational formats and conventions for socially critical ends."[3] Films of the late 1980s and early 1990s, on the other hand, tend to reflect a much more conservative cultural and political climate in the United States. Thus, although *The Front* may have been an "utterly safe project" in 1976, as Woody Allen has said,[4] it seems in many ways politically daring today, especially in comparison to *Guilty By Suspicion*.

Tales from the Front

The historical events on which both films are based need only a cursory summary here. In 1947, J. Parnell Thomas chaired a series of hearings on alleged Communist infiltration in the Hollywood motion picture industry. Twenty-four "friendly" witnesses—including Gary Cooper, Ronald Reagan, and Walt Disney—testified that Hollywood was infiltrated with Communists, and identified a number of supposed subversives by name. Ten "unfriendly" witnesses—including Dalton Trumbo, Lester Cole, and Ring Lardner, Jr.—refused to cooperate with the Committee, contending that the investigations themselves were unconstitutional. The "Hollywood Ten," as they came to be known, were convicted of contempt of Congress and served sentences of six months to one year in jail.

Shortly after the hearings, more than 50 studio executives met secretly at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. They emerged with the now infamous "Waldorf Statement," in which they agreed to suspend the Hollywood Ten without pay, deny employment to anyone who did not cooperate with the investigations, and refuse to hire Communists. When a second round of hearings convened in 1951, the Committee's first witness, actor Larry Parks, pleaded, "Don't present me with the choice of either being in contempt of this Committee and going to jail or forcing me to really crawl through the mud to be an informer."[5] But the choice was presented, the witness opted for the latter, and the ground rules for the decade were set.

From that day forward, it was not enough to answer the question "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" Rather, those called to testify were advised by their attorneys that they had three choices: to invoke the First Amendment, with its guarantee of free speech and association, and risk going to prison like the Hollywood Ten; to invoke the Fifth Amendment, with its privilege against self-incrimination, and lose their jobs; or to cooperate with the Committee by naming others as Communists in hopes of continuing to work in the industry. By the mid-1950s more than 200 suspected Communists had been blacklisted by the major studios. The Hollywood blacklist quickly spread to the radio and television industries, and took on a new scope with the formation of free enterprise blacklisters such as American Business Consultants and the distribution of publications such as *Red Channels*. Joseph McCarthy was censured by the U.S. Senate in 1954, but the blacklist went virtually unchallenged until 1960, when screenwriter Dalton Trumbo worked openly for the first time since 1947. And it affected others, such as actor Lionel Stander and screenwriter Paul Jarrico, well into the 1960s. The House Committee on Un-American Activities remained in existence until 1975.

That the HUAC investigations constitute what Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky call "flak"—actions meant to be punitive and threatening rather than fact-finding or truth-seeking[6]—is evidenced by the Com-

mittee's own eventual admission that it already had the information it was allegedly seeking. According to Navasky, witnesses such as Larry Parks were called upon not to provide information that would lead to any acquittal or conviction, but rather to play a symbolic role in a surrealistic morality play.

> The Committee was in essence serving as a kind of national parole board, whose job was to determine whether the "criminals" had truly repented of their evil ways. Only by a witness's naming names and giving details, it was said, could the Committee be certain that his break with the past was genuine. The demand for names was not a quest for evidence; it was a test of character. The naming of names had shifted from a means to an end.[7]

It is significant in this light that both *The Front* and *Guilty By Suspicion* are set in the early 1950s, and that the dramatic climax of each film involves the hero being asked to inform on others.

The Front stars Woody Allen as Howard Prince, a lunch-counter cashier and small-time bookie who pretends to be the author of television scripts actually written by blacklisted writers until he himself is called before the Committee. *Guilty By Suspicion* stars Robert De Niro as director David Merrill, Hollywood's "golden boy," whose successful career is interrupted when he is named as a Communist and blacklisted by the studios. Both films feature nonpolitical heroes who, after a series of tribulations and equivocations, refuse to cooperate with the Committee in the climactic final scenes—David Merrill with the historically resonant "Don't you have any shame?" and Howard Prince with the cathartic "Gentlemen, you can go fuck yourselves."

That the heroes of both films should be apolitical innocents or vaguely liberal humanists is, perhaps, sadly obvious—this despite Navasky's suggestion that advocates both right and left would have preferred a movie about a real Communist.[8] As *Rolling Stone* notes:

> In almost every American film treatment of these witch hunts . . . , the hero has wandered into Communist-cell meetings by mistake or through idle curiosity. The idea that Hollywood professionals might have gathered out of conscience actually to criticize the workings of the capitalist system seems to scare filmmakers almost as much as it did the HUAC.[9]

Or, as the *Village Voice* puts it, "Far be it from the movies to have a pinko comsymp hero."[10] But it is worth noting that not all reviewers harbor such disdain for this particular cinematic convention. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, insists that "defining the main character as apolitical actually keeps *The Front* from becoming didactic," and applauds the apparent absence of any "self-righteous ideologues stumping for justice" in the film.[11] And the *New York Times* claims that the "best thing" about *Guilty By Suspicion* is that David Merrill is "by no means any kind of political being." Rather, Winkler's film "makes the wise choice of approaching its subject without grandstanding or invective. The benefits of hindsight are never brought to bear upon David Merrill's problems."[12]

The notion that we might do well to reconsider the blacklist era without the "benefits of hindsight," even in our fictions, seems to me an odd one. And Woody Allen's suggestion that *The Front* is "not a devastating indictment of the blacklist," but merely "an entertaining reminder that these things went on in this country,"[13] seems somewhat disingenuous. In fact, I would argue that *The Front* displays a rather sophisticated understanding of the political and economic underpinnings of the blacklist, and launches a fairly radical critique of the inquisitions. *Guilty By Suspicion*, on the other hand, seems more informed by Irwin Winkler's stated fear that his work might be perceived as a defense of Communism. In this sense, *Guilty By Suspicion* is indeed as paranoid of any leftist or even liberal critique of capitalism as the House Committee on Un-American Activities was in the early 1950s.

Red Scare Revisions

> How long, one wonders, will it be before some jolly spirit mounts a Broadway musical about J. Parnell Thomas and the Hollywood Ten, or we are given a rock version of the Army-McCarthy hearings?[14]
>
> —Hilton Kramer, 1976

Both *The Front* and *Guilty By Suspicion* feature representations of, allusions to, or composites of historical figures. In *The Front*, for example, there is a blacklisted writer named Alfred Miller, an apparent reference to Arthur Miller, and a comedian named Hecky Brown, who is modeled on TV actor Philip Loeb (Papa on "The Goldbergs"). In *Guilty By Suspicion*, there are similarities between an anguished informer called Larry Nolan and the real life Larry Parks, a blacklisted actress named Dorothy Nolan and the real life Dorothy Comingore, and an exiled Communist called Joe Lesser and the real life Joseph Losey. The film's hero, David Merrill, has been described as a rather

bizarre composite of John Berry, Elia Kazan, Sterling Hayden, and Lillian Hellman.[15]

Both films also feature actual blacklist victims in key creative roles. Their participation in the production of *The Front* is celebrated in the film's closing credits, which list the names and blacklist dates of screenwriter Walter Bernstein, producer/director Martin Ritt, and actors Zero Mostel, John Randolph, Lloyd Gough, Joshua Shelley, and Herschel Bernardi. In *Guilty By Suspicion*, Sam Wanamaker, an actor who spent ten years in exile, plays a lawyer; Ileana Douglas, whose grandparents were blacklisted, plays Darryl Zanuck's assistant; and Joan Scott, widow of Adrian Scott of the Hollywood Ten, plays a teacher. Although the late Abraham Polonsky wrote the original screenplay for *Guilty By Suspicion*, his name is notably absent from the film's credits—an important point to which I will return later.

That the films can be seen as part of two waves of Red scare revisions in the mid-1970s and early 1990s is clear. In 1975, for example, CBS broadcast "Fear on Trial," and in 1976, the Screen Writers Guild chose Carl Foreman to present the Laurel Award to Michael Wilson. (In 1957, Foreman and Wilson's Oscar for *Bridge over the River Kwai* was awarded to the author of the novel on which the screenplay was based—even though the novel was in French—since both Foreman and Wilson were blacklisted in Hollywood.) Also in 1976, the Motion Picture Academy honored Lillian Hellman, whose just-published memoir, *Scoundrel Time*, was a best-seller. Dalton Trumbo died that year, and a biography and volume of his letters were reported forthcoming. A BBC documentary on the career of Edward R. Murrow that had as its climax Murrow's *See It Now* program on McCarthy was aired, and *Hollywood on Trial*, a feature-length documentary, was released. Eric Bentley used the transcripts of the HUAC hearings as the basis of both a play, *Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been*, and a documentary volume, *Thirty Years of Treason*.

"It is a phenomenon, all right—this wave of revisionist accounts, fictional and nonfictional, historical and mythological, of events that occurred a quarter-century ago," Hilton Kramer fumed in the arts pages of the *New York Times* in 1976. Kramer casts the Red scare revisions of the 1970s as an orchestrated attempt by the left, in "the present climate of liberal opinion," to "acquit 60s radicalism of all malevolent consequence . . . by portraying 30s radicalism as similarly innocent, a phenomenon wholly benign, altruistic and admirable."[16] Kramer's conspiracy theory may be questionable, but the liberal orientation, mainstream distribution, and popular reception of the 1970s revisions *does* suggest a "climate of opinion" very different from that of the early 1990s. As Rex Reed reminded *Vogue* readers in his review of *The Front*, "[T]he events in this film all happened, and they almost happened again during the Nixon years."[17]

A second wave of revisions began in 1990, when the British-made film *Fellow Traveler* premiered in the U.S. on HBO. In 1991, both *The Front* and the documentary *Hollywood's Darkest Days* were aired in conjunction with the release of *Guilty By Suspicion*. Also in 1991, a film about blacklisted screenwriter Waldo Salt was nominated for an Academy Award for best feature documentary and broadcast on PBS. In 1992, the *Los Angeles Times* published a "Blacklist Video List" and the *New York Times* announced a three-month film series at the Brooklyn Museum entitled "Hollywood on Trial: Films from the Blacklist Era." Patricia Bosworth's memoir of her father, Hollywood Ten lawyer Bartley Crum, was reported forthcoming.

The revisionist histories from both periods, and popular press accounts of them, reflect a general consensus that the tactics—if not necessarily the motivations—of the Committee were wrong. Critics both right and left of center commonly refer to the period as "the plague years," to the hearings as "witch hunts," and to the Committee itself as paranoid, cruel, and repressive. Even Hilton Kramer, in his bristling essay on *The Front* and other mid-1970s revisions, acknowledges "the sordid proceedings" of the Committee and the "political vagaries" of McCarthy.[18] And John Simon, who pans *Guilty By Suspicion* in the *National Review*, grudgingly admits that the exertions of HUAC "constitute one of the more deplorable chapters in American history."[19]

But the revisionist histories of the early 1990s are decidedly more conservative than those of the mid-1970s. A number of reviews of *Guilty By Suspicion*, for example, echo Hilton Kramer's reactionary—and utterly atypical—critique of *The Front*. For example: "Since the culture is a liberal one largely shaped by Hollywood, it has to invent a fearsome right-wing oppressive America against which to hurl its paranoid fulminations."[20] But surely it was not necessary to invent an oppressive right wing in the wake of the Reagan era and the fall of the Soviet Union. And just as *Guilty By Suspicion* is much more conservative in intent and effect than *The Front*, the publication of an apologia for Bartley Crum is a far cry from that of the letters of Dalton Trumbo or the memoirs of Lillian Hellman. Crum was a Republican, one of only two non-Communist lawyers hired by the Hollywood Ten. And he represented Edward Dmytryk, the only member

of the Ten to recant and reappear before HUAC in 1951 as an informer, naming 26 colleagues and friends as Communists.

In a striking instance of anti-PC backlash (and a remarkable example of "balance" in contemporary U.S. journalism), the *New York Times* met the release of *Guilty By Suspicion* with a "Dialogue" on the subject of "Speech on Campus" entitled "Say the Right Thing—or Else." The exchange pits Judith Martin, author of the popular "Miss Manners" column, against Amanda Foreman, daughter of blacklisted screenwriter Carl Foreman. Martin advocates a "standard of academic etiquette" by which First Amendment rights are curtailed in order to ensure that political debates are conducted in a polite and genteel manner.[21] Foreman equates the plight of left-wing activists accused of being disloyal in the 1950s with that of right-wing academics accused of being intolerant today.[22] Both authors imply that strained silence is preferable to impassioned argument, Foreman's "High Noon at the PC Corral" headline notwithstanding.

"It's not a subject that requires a lot of moral deliberation," the *Washington Post* proclaims in a dismissive review of *Guilty By Suspicion*, "We know who the bad guys are."[23] But do we, really? In fact, the makers of both films were criticized by some for caricaturing the inquisitors as "icy-eyed Red-Hunters," "gelatinous ogres," and "red-baiting swine." *The Front* was deemed "unworthy of its excellent intentions," in part because "the bad guys who work for the Committee never reveal the slightest indication that they are even peripherally related to the human race."[24] *Guilty By Suspicion* was criticized "for not depicting 'the climate' that made such tactics necessary."[25] And Irwin Winkler felt the need to justify his vilification of the inquisitors in *Guilty By Suspicion* on the grounds that they "gave anti-Communism a bad name and made the fight against it more difficult."[26]

But the writers, directors, and actors who endeavored to bring fictional characters based on historical figures to life in these films had much more to consider than whether or not to vilify the inquisitors or to valorize their "innocent" (i.e., non-Communist) victims. What of the Communists and former Communists, all but a handful of those actually called before the Committee from 1951 on? They might be represented as committed and informed—or they might be discredited as duped, or redeemed as reformed. If heroized, they might be portrayed as political activists working for social and economic equality, or rugged individualists thumbing their noses at authority. And what of the informers—roughly one-third of the witnesses actually called before the Committee—who opted to clear themselves by naming the names of others? They, too, might be cast as patriotic heroes, backstabbing villains, or pathetic victims. The subject, it would seem, requires "a lot of moral deliberation" indeed.

Heroes, Villains, and Victims

> It will do no good to search for villains or heroes or saints or devils because there were none; there were only victims.[27]
>
> —Dalton Trumbo, 1970

Dalton Trumbo's "only victims" speech, delivered before the Screen Writers Guild in acceptance of its highest honor, the Laurel Award, was clearly meant to be healing. (Instead, the speech sparked a controversy that smoldered for years.) In it, Trumbo asked that the blacklist era be remembered as "a time of evil," and insisted that "no one on either side who survived it came through untouched by evil." Rather, he said,

> Caught in a situation that had passed beyond the control of mere individuals, each person reacted as his nature, his needs, his convictions, and his particular circumstances compelled him to. There was bad faith and good, honesty and dishonesty, courage and cowardice, selflessness and opportunism, wisdom and stupidity, good and bad on both sides; and almost every individual involved, no matter where he stood, combined some or all of these antithetical qualities in his own person, in his own acts. . . . Some suffered less than others, some grew and some diminished, but in the final tally we were *all* victims because almost without exception each of us felt compelled to say things he did not want to say, to do things he did not want to do, to deliver and receive wounds he truly did not want to exchange. That is why none of us—right, left, or center—emerged from that long nightmare without sin.[28]

Trumbo's description of a situation "beyond the control of mere individuals" rings true. But it is fundamentally contrary to the conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema, conventions to which both *The Front* and *Guilty By Suspicion* largely adhere. According to David Bordwell, "Screenplay manuals demand that a character's traits be clearly defined and consistent with one another. . . . Psychological causality, presented through defined characters acting to achieve announced

goals, gives the classical film its characteristic progression."[29] With this in mind, I would like to take a closer look at the heroes, villains, and victims constructed in these revisions of the blacklist era, and at the functions they perform and effects they achieve in each narrative. I want to show that while *The Front* attempts, with some success, to use classical character construction and development to critique what Herman and Chomsky call "anticommunism as a national religion,"[30] *Guilty By Suspicion*, ironically, uses the same conventions to advance the reactionary ideology it purports to condemn.

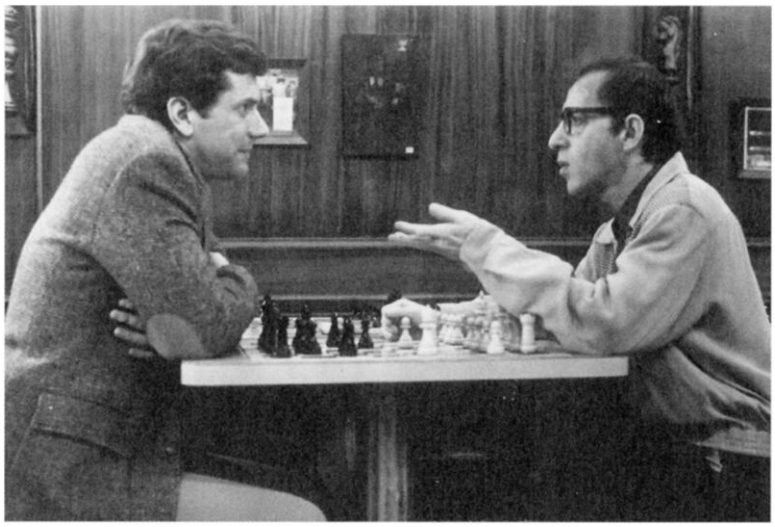
The Heroes

The hero of *The Front*, Howard Prince, is in many ways shaped by the stage and screen persona of Woody Allen. Howard is "an endearingly neurotic, amiably anarchic and slightly unscrupulous schnook,"[31] whose boyhood chum, Alfred Miller, just happens to be a television writer. His position outside the entertainment industry justifies his initial cluelessness about the blacklist. When Alfred explains that he can't get work because he's a Communist sympathizer, Howard is genuinely baffled: "So? You *always* were." "It's not so popular anymore," Alfred replies. Howard naïvely suggests first a legal solution ("So who can you sue?") and then an illegal one ("I know some guys who will break their legs"), foreshadowing the more sophisticated strategizing that ensues when he himself is called to testify. Howard readily agrees to "front" as a writer for his friend, only mildly protesting the ten percent cut Alfred insists he would have paid to an agent anyway. He then quickly expands his clientele by taking on two of Alfred's blacklisted friends, and begins to enjoy his new status as a talented (and prolific) author. Howard reaps not only economic but also social rewards for his work. Soon, he romances a beautiful script editor, Florence Barrett, befriends an amiable television comedian, Hecky Brown, and impresses the guys at the diner, who never knew he could write. *The Front* thus muddies the moral waters by thrusting its nebbish hero into a situation in which he can be ideologically opposed to the blacklist and yet benefit materially from it without guilt.

The hero of *Guilty By Suspicion*, David Merrill, is similarly shaped by the star persona of Robert De Niro. David is a rugged individualist, just too plain independent and ornery to last long in any political party, especially the Communist Party. When Hollywood heavyweights ignore David's calls, it seems inevitable that he will hurl the phone across the room. Because he is an insider in Hollywood, David's utter ignorance of the HUAC investigations is less tenable than Howard's. *Guilty By Suspicion* condenses time and stretches credibility by having David return home from Europe on the very day that Larry Nolan "crawls through the mud" before the Committee. The next morning, David is advised by Darryl Zanuck to visit attorney Felix Graff, who urges him to be a "team player" (i.e., a friendly witness). He storms out of Graff's office and begins to watch his projects and fortunes dwindle.

In keeping with the conventions of character construction in the classical Hollywood cinema, both

Guilty By Suspicion: The hearings



The Front:
The writers

Howard and David have clearly defined goals, motivations which propel the narrative of each film forward. But these stated goals change somewhat as each character is developed, and in significant ways. Initially, Howard wants to help out his friend, and, admittedly, to benefit himself in so doing. Later, he hopes to maintain the lifestyle to which he grows accustomed, and still be seen as an ally to the victims of the situation he is exploiting. In the end, however, Howard's primary goal is to stop others from being hurt by the blacklist—in part to avenge Hecky's death, in part to regain Florence's respect, and in part to rebut Alfred's accusations—but finally, I think, because he is convinced it is the right thing to do. Howard is radicalized by the events surrounding him, and undergoes a fundamental transformation from individual interest to class action.

In *Guilty By Suspicion*, David's primary goal is to work. He wants to make Hollywood movies and enjoy the material and social benefits such work affords him. Later, David still wants to work, even in the absence of lavish rewards. Eventually he decides he would also like to spend more time with his estranged wife and son. In the end, David defies the Committee for a number of very *personal* reasons: it has kept him from working, injured his friends, frightened his son, implicated his wife, and generally pissed him off. Unlike Howard, whose personal and professional successes are a direct result of the blacklist, David's career—for which he has already sacrificed his personal life—is directly threatened by it. Because David has known success before the blacklist, he can envision it afterwards. Because Howard's personal and professional gains are entirely dependent upon the blacklist, his ultimate defiance of the Committee is more significant.

In both *The Front* and *Guilty By Suspicion* (and again, in keeping with the conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema) the hero's decision to defy the Committee leads to or solidifies a reconciliation with his estranged lover. As Bordwell has shown, the classical film typically integrates one group of characters into two lines of action—and almost invariably, one of these lines of action involves heterosexual romantic love.[32] But here again, the differences between the two films are striking. In *The Front*, Florence arrives at Howard's apartment for a dinner date wearing a bright red cape and a little black dress—politicized *and* eroticized, in the iconography of the genre. Giddy with commitment, she announces that she has quit her job as a senior script editor and intends to start a newsletter about the blacklist ("People are dying to talk as long as I don't use their names"). Significantly, she is not suspected of Communist leanings herself, nor has she been called to testify against others. Rather, she has come to the realization that "They count on our silence." When Howard refuses to help with the newsletter and begs her to apologize to the network, Florence abruptly aborts the evening and severs the relationship.

It is difficult to imagine Ruth Merrill acting with such individual autonomy and altruistic conviction in *Guilty By Suspicion*. She has divorced David because he devotes more time and energy to work than family (thereby assuring that he will do more of same), and has apparently neglected to get a job or life of her own (hanging around the house, allowing David to drop in and sleep on the couch whenever he likes). "I did not want to do a Hollywood story about a wife who had left her husband because he works too hard," said Abraham Polonsky. "When husbands work too hard, the wives don't leave them, they get lovers."[33]

With the changes Winkler made in Polonsky's script, *Guilty By Suspicion* may be read as one of a small genre of recent films that Thomas Benson calls "melodramas of remarriage." In such films, a couple, still married or recently divorced, are no longer close because the husband has been devoting too much time to a successful career. A remarriage is made possible when an event in the husband's world subjects him to trauma and mortification. When he realizes his mistake, recovers his humility, and acknowledges the autonomy of his wife, the reconciliation follows. Benson includes among his examples *The Doctor* (1991), *Regarding Henry* (1991), and *Guilty By Suspicion*.

> Just as the political story [in *Guilty By Suspicion*] is about the cycle of guilt, mortification, and redemption, so is the personal story. David Merrill, though sexually loyal to his wife, has betrayed her by putting his work before his family. He is guilty of disloyalty, and can be restored to his family after undergoing not only sincere change and renunciation of his former ways, but also a mortification that purges his guilt and ensures that he will forsake other loyalties to preserve and honor family. The cycle of betrayal, guilt, mortification, and purification, which we resent so much when it is enacted by the committee, is exactly repeated for our admiration in the remarriage of David and Ruth Merrill.[34]

It is precisely in such terms—the personal rather than the political—that David is eventually persuaded to testify before the Committee. And it is precisely for personal reasons that he ultimately defies it, maintaining his rugged individualism while simultaneously undergoing a tortured retreat to the nuclear family.

Not only does *Guilty By Suspicion* choose to focus on an apolitical victim, it virtually cannot conceive of anyone otherwise. The only exception is Joe Lesser, a character loosely based on director Joseph Losey and played by Martin Scorsese in a fleeting cameo. Not only is the role upstaged by the man who plays it, but Lesser quickly leaves Hollywood for England, never to be heard from again. In this film's world, going into exile is child's play. There is no sense of the toll expatriation took on the lives and careers of those who were forced into it.

In this light, the most notable thing about representations of Communists in *The Front* is, quite simply, that there *are* some. "I'm a Communist, Howard," says one of the blacklisted writers. "I want you to know that right off. I took the Fifth." "We're not blacklisted because we're kind to dumb animals or because somebody lied about us or made a mistake," says another. Admittedly, they appear in supporting rather than leading roles, and we never see or hear any evidence of left-wing philosophies or political activities. But they do meet and strategize as a group, use plural pronouns, and show genuine concern for the fates of persons other than themselves. "We're worried about *you*," they tell Howard—a sentiment unthinkable unless directed at immediate family or lifelong friends in *Guilty By Suspicion*. *The Front* thus acknowledges that there were "innocent" victims of the blacklist (i.e., cases of mistaken identity), but it refuses to pretend that they were the only ones whose constitutional rights were violated by it. Indeed, the blacklisted characters in *The Front*, who insist that they have not been falsely accused, seem to be tossing a prescient retort to those in *Guilty By Suspicion*, who plead innocence or ignorance of any political thoughts. Finally, although they are not leading men—and so not technically "heroes"—the Communists in *The Front* are anything but villains.

The Villains

In addition to the HUAC honchos and their minions, both *The Front* and *Guilty By Suspicion* vilify the lawyers who encourage those called before the Committee to name names, and, to a lesser extent, the network and studio executives who urge their employees to heed the advice of the lawyers. In *The Front*, for example, a network attorney ghoulishly urges Howard to name his friend Hecky, who is already dead, a victim of the blacklist by suicide. And in *Guilty By Suspicion*, a studio attorney encourages David to testify in the name of self-interest and family values: "Is it worth all this pain, David? Is it worth all this pain to your little boy, for example? Just say, 'I'm sorry. I was young. I was foolish. I made a mistake. I was immature.' Just think of yourself."

Both characters are based on historical figures such as Martin Gang, who represented more informers than any other Hollywood lawyer, Lee J. Cobb, Sterling Hayden, Abe Burrows, and Lloyd Bridges among them (enough, according to Navasky, to support the charge that he was converting his clients into stool pigeons). Gang's philosophical position was that a lawyer's obligation is always to serve the best interests of his clients—in this case, to help entertainment workers avoid being blacklisted. Though critics say he did it for the money, Gang denies he ever profited. And while he insists that none of his clients named *new* names, the record does not bear this out.

Guilty By Suspicion:
Naming names

But to vilify the inquisitors as self-serving demagogues and the lawyers as blacklist ambulance chasers is fairly easy. *The Front* extends its circle of the damned to corporate sponsors and free enterprise blacklisters. Soon after Howard begins fronting for Alfred, there is a comic scene in which he is asked to do an emergency rewrite on a World War II drama because the show's sponsor, a gas company, objects to a reference to a gas chamber. The scene is rich in dark humor, with Howard, the hapless non-writer, suggesting "So make it a firing squad." But it also establishes a motif of corporate control over media content that recurs throughout the film.

In a later scene, a network executive introduces a supermarket owner to Howard and his producer at a cocktail party. The businessman expresses concern about the political affiliations of the actors on the show. The executive assures him that the network takes "every precaution," and the producer promises "full cooperation." Again the scene is short and played for laughs; when Jackson suggests that some of the actors are "pretty pink," Howard assures him "It's just the makeup." But it also exposes a chain of command that begins with the red-baiting of a corporate sponsor and ends with the blacklisting of actors like Hecky. As the producer puts it, "Who wants trouble?" In contrast, economic incentives for the Hollywood studios to comply with HUAC—such as threats of film boycotts organized by the Hearst newspapers, the American Legion, and other "patriotic" national organizations—are nowhere to be seen in *Guilty By Suspicion*.

The Front also features Hennesy, a character loosely based on historical figures such as Ken Bierly, a former FBI agent who went into the business of peddling accusations and clearances with his Research and Security Corporation. Hennesy agrees to check out Howard ("That's what you're paying me for") even as Hecky paces nervously about his office. Soon after, Hecky is tempted to inform on Howard, the suggestion being that Hennesy has agreed to clear Hecky if he snares him another client in need of clearance. The free enterprisers are thus shown to be working in much the same way as the Committee—but with a fee on each witness's head—yet another economic angle never broached in *Guilty By Suspicion*. Here Hecky, who rifles through Howard's desk drawers one night, is seen as an almost-informer, much like Bunny, who begs David for permission to name him in *Guilty By Suspicion*, but is redeemed for his refusal to do so in the final seconds of the film.

The only reference to an *actual* informer in *The Front* is a fleeting comment by one of Alfred's friends that a colleague has been blacklisted "impeccably—named by his own brother-in-law." *Guilty By Suspicion* dispenses with informers in the opening scene, in which Larry Nolan appears before the Committee. And here Nolan is depicted as a cowardly weakling who buckles easily under Committee intimidation, naming his friends and possibly even his wife as Communists. This lessens his complexity as a foil to David and, more importantly, as an example of the destruction wrought by the Un-American Activities Committee. Finally, neither film is comfortable dealing with the thorny issue of informers, although both would probably reluctantly include them in the category of villains rather than victims.

The Victims

The most obvious victim of the blacklist in *The Front* is Hecky, the TV actor played by Zero Mostel, who was modeled in part after Mostel himself and in part after

The Front:
The real victim

Philip Loeb. Loeb's own *Red Channels* listing was long. He had signed a petition defending the Moscow purge trials, belonged to the Council for Pan-American Democracy, and an organization to End Jim Crow in Baseball, and was active in AFTRA politics. In 1955, Loeb checked into a room at the Hotel Taft and swallowed an overdose of sleeping pills. In *The Front*, when Hecky is sent to Hennesy to clear himself, he explains away his left-wing past as a mere ploy to sleep with Communist girls. It's true that *The Front*, like *Guilty By Suspicion*, is more comfortable eulogizing those who flirted with Communist causes in the course of sexual or romantic pursuits than with those guilty by political conviction or association. Nonetheless, in this scene we learn that Hecky's *Red Channels* listing would be about as long as Loeb's: he cheerfully admits to marching in a May Day Parade, subscribing to the *Daily Worker*, and signing petitions for Loyalist Spain and Russian war relief. Finally, after a series of humiliations, he checks into a hotel, orders a bottle of wine, and throws himself out the window.

Hecky's counterpart in *Guilty By Suspicion* is Dorothy Nolan, a character based in part on Dorothy Comingore, who played Susan Alexander in *Citizen Kane*. Comingore's husband, screenwriter Richard Collins, named 26 names before the Committee in 1951. In 1952, she appeared before the Committee, took the Fifth, and entered into a vicious and highly publicized legal battle with Collins over custody of their children. She was accused of being an unfit mother because of alcoholism and Communist leanings, lost the battle, and never worked again. In *Guilty By Suspicion*, we are given plenty of evidence of Dorothy's alcoholism—she is literally not drinking or drunk in only one scene in the film. Unlike Hecky, however, we learn nothing of Dorothy's political activism. She is never called to clear herself or testify against others, and seems nearly as clueless about the blacklist as David. She kicks her husband out of the house five minutes into the film—not necessarily because he has informed on others, but because she suspects that he has named her and their closest friends, rendering her reaction one of personal betrayal rather than political principle. Eventually, she drives her car over a cliff. Such deaths are a common plot device in Hollywood films, used partly to condemn the unfeeling victimizers who prompt them, but also and equally importantly to underscore the strength of the protagonist in standing up to similar ordeals. Finally, *Guilty By Suspicion* suggests that it is not so much the blacklist as Dorothy's own psychological weakness that leads to her death.

Not Yet the Post-Cold War Era

In the late 1990s yet another rash of Red scare revisions began to emerge. And for the most part, discourses surrounding these revisions continued in the conservative manner of those including and surrounding *Guilty By Suspicion*. Most notably, perhaps, a debate was waged in the arts and editorial pages of the *New York Times* over whether the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, the American Film Institute, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences were guilty of "blacklisting" director Elia Kazan, who named eight friends before the Committee in 1952, and whose *On the Waterfront* is widely seen as a defense of informers. Kazan was given the Academy's Lifetime

Achievement Award in 1999. Abraham Polonsky died later that year.

Polonsky had said that Kazan should use his acceptance speech to apologize, but the director remained unrepentant, and the dramatic protests many predicted did not materialize. Even blacklisted writer Bernard Gordon, who did picket outside, said "It would be too much to boo or walk out."[35] Some folks refused to applaud while others merely refused to stand while applauding. An editorial in the *New York Times* admitted that "not only did [Kazan] name names, causing lasting damage to individual careers, but he lent his prestige and moral authority to what was essentially an immoral process, a brief but nevertheless damaging period of officially sponsored hysteria that exacted a huge toll on individual lives, on free speech and on democracy." But the editorial goes on to insist that "It is artistry, not politics, that the awards are supposed to honor."[36]

The *Times* took a similar stance when a film version of Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible* was released in 1997. *The Crucible* is widely seen as a thinly veiled attack on the HUAC inquisitors and informers, as Miller's central character goes to his death rather than betray his friends. The review applauds the way in which director Nicholas Hytner has "stripped away" the allegorical underpinnings of Miller's play, rendering the film version of *The* Crucible, "with its sensuously lighted interiors, hand-hewn beams and rustic furnishings," little more than a costume drama: "*The Crucible* suggests how much we have to gain by treating politics as just another element of a work's life rather than its primary reason for drawing breath, even if, in this case, it was."[37]

Even the liberal *In These Times*, in its review of Walter Bernstein's *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (1996), felt the need to defend Bernstein's Communist sympathies by equating them with antifascism; to denounce Bernstein's Communist sympathies by associating them with Stalinism; and, finally, to praise the author for resisting the "self-righteousness that still plagues" accounts of the blacklist period. "The memoir would make a terrible movie," the reviewer concludes. "It has too many gray areas."[38] The assumption that any deviation from the classical Hollywood cinema's insistence on clearly defined heroes, villains, and victims would make for a horrible movie is simplistic to say the least. And the notion that the actual events of the blacklist era are not the stuff of high drama is absurd. Rather, films such as *Guilty By Suspicion* render real-life dramas banal. As Georgia Brown quips in *The Village Voice*: "Will David, anxious to get back to work, name names? Guess right and advance to Screenwriting 2."[39]

In *Guilty By Suspicion*, Larry Nolan names names, wins custody of his young son by accusing his ex-wife of being a an unfit mother, and goes back to work in Hollywood. In real life, Larry Parks' tortured testimony and consequent controversiality resulted in the end of a career that had been on the brink of superstardom. In *Guilty By Suspicion*, Dorothy Nolan, cattily attributing her inability to get roles to competition from Marilyn Monroe, dyes her hair platinum blonde. In real life, Dorothy Comingore, upon hearing her husband on the radio testifying before the Committee, was so ashamed that she shaved her head. In *Guilty By Suspicion*, Joe Lesser cheerfully packs for England as if living in exile were an adventure. In real life, director Joseph Losey's last memory of his homeland was hiding in a darkened house to avoid service of a subpoena.

In real life, Sam Ornitz urged his comrades in the Hollywood Ten to "at least be as brave as the people we write about."[40] Dalton Trumbo proclaimed his contempt conviction "a completely just verdict" in that "I *had* contempt for that Congress, and have had contempt for several since."[41] And Ring Lardner, Jr., recalled becoming "reacquainted" with J. Parnell Thomas in prison. (Thomas was convicted of misappropriating government funds as the Hollywood Ten exhausted their appeals.)[42]

Finally, the *New York Times*' preference for a Committee witness lacking the benefits of hindsight might have been tenable were *Guilty By Suspicion* set in the late 1940s. According to Dalton Trumbo, the Hollywood Ten were "virgins" when they brashly confronted the Committee, because no one had yet been blacklisted, nor would they be until weeks later:

> So we could not be certain we would lose our jobs; neither could we have been certain we would go to jail; neither could we be certain that we would become so notorious that there would be no way we could clean ourselves up for a decade. Now, cut to two years later: everybody else who comes up before the Committee knows exactly what the penalty is. All the people who took the First and Fifth amendments after us knew something we had not known, namely, that they would not work for years. . . . We didn't know how hot the water was.[43]

The Hollywood Ten were in this sense truly innocent. But in Irwin Winkler's eyes, the only innocent victims of the blacklist were those *falsely* accused of

Communist sympathies, and none of the Hollywood Ten qualified.

It was for this reason that Abraham Polonsky removed his name from the credits of *Guilty By Suspicion*. According to Navasky, Polonsky had insisted that "Merrill should be a former Communist, like all but a handful of the witnesses called by the committee in its rowdy and ceaseless search for 'subversion' in the entertainment community." Moreover, the blacklist was known for breaking up families, not bringing them back together, and Polonsky's script insisted that David Merrill's marriage should be a happy one to an independent woman. Asked to comment, Polonsky replied, "You want my comment? I took my name off. That's my comment. It violates my esthetics, my politics, my morality."[44] Walter Bernstein, who concludes his memoir of the blacklist on the set of *The Front*, reminds us that "We have come a long way for this."[45] But Abraham Polonsky, forced by the blacklist to disavow credit for his work in the 1950s—and by his own conscience to do so 40 years later—reminds us of how far we have to go.

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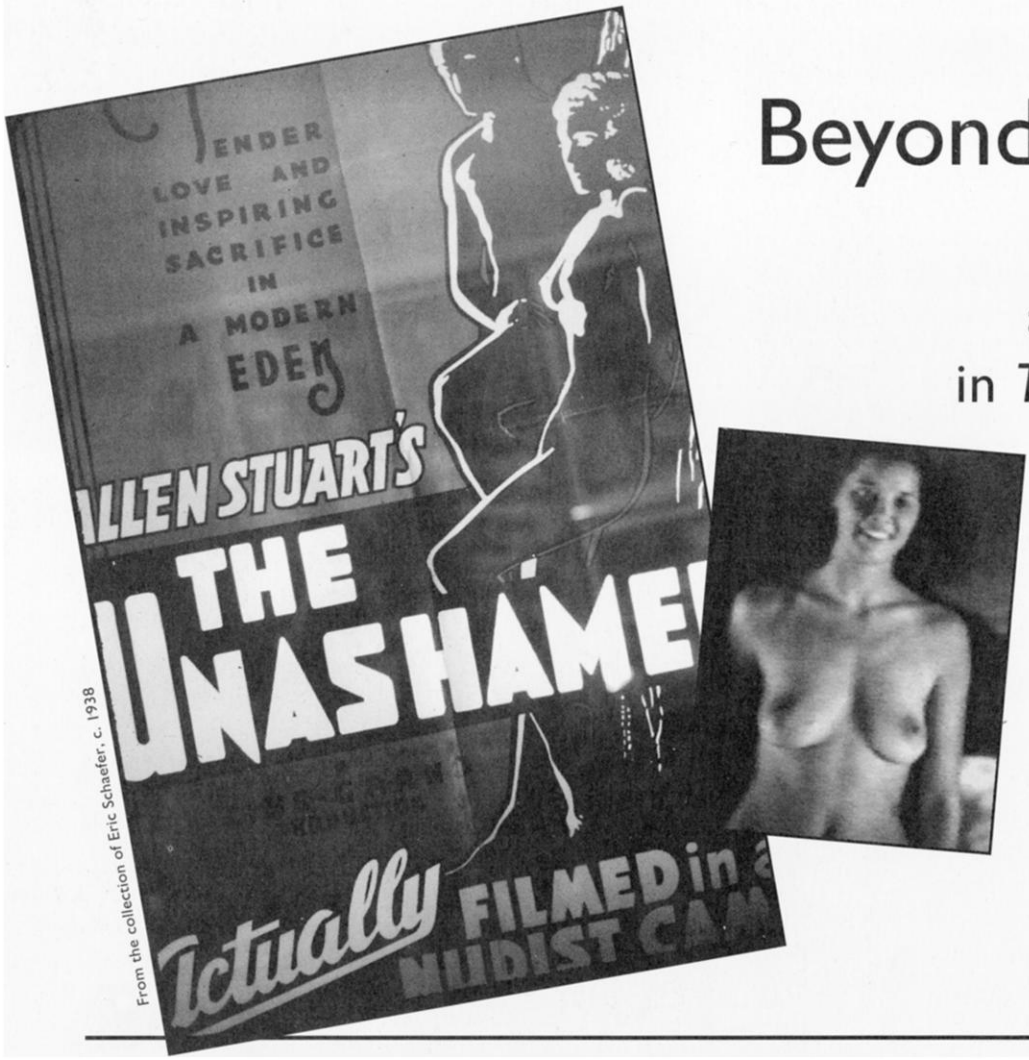
Robert M. Payne

Beyond the Pale

Nudism, Race, and Resistance in *The Unashamed*



From the collection of Eric Schaefer, c. 1938

> It is an interesting question how far people would retain their relative rank if they were divested of their clothes.
>
> —Henry David Thoreau[1]

The Classical Exploitation Film and the Nudist Genre

An officially despised but nonetheless profitable brand of motion picture made prior to the 1960s, the classical exploitation film was produced outside the Hollywood system. It trafficked in all forms of content forbidden by the Production Code (short of hard-core pornography) and played in the "Main Street" theaters off the beaten track. Because they sold themselves on the sensationalism of their subject matter, these films had little use for the gloss of their Hollywood rivals: sub-Poverty Row production values and stilted performances by the actors were the rule. Like the Hollywood feature and the documentary, the classical exploitation film is a *regime* that encompasses several distinct (but not necessarily exclusive) genres, such as the sex-hygiene film, the drug film, the vice film, and the burlesque film. Another exploitation genre is one that has been almost completely forgotten, one that seems anathema to the popular image of pre-1960s America: the nudist film. Set mainly in nudist camps, these films, which included both dramas and documentaries, gave their audience a sight unavailable on the Hollywood screen: a full view of the naked human body—albeit with the genitals obscured. Although dozens of nudist films were made prior to 1960, only one is acknowledged as a fictional drama in which the spectacle of the nudity is cohesively integrated into a character-driven narrative: Allen Stuart's *The Unashamed* (1938).

With so much going against them aesthetically, it's no wonder that pre-1960s exploitation films, such as *The Unashamed*, fell off the cinema historian's radar

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for so long. But their absence has fostered an incomplete and misleading picture of American film history. However, a more complete historical panorama is finally starting to take shape. In *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*, Eric Schaefer not only traces the historical development of the classical exploitation film, but he also theorizes its underlying structural and discursive idiosyncrasies.[2] As Schaefer persuasively argues, exploitation films were fraught with internal contradictions. The regime's reliance on sensationalism gave its films an air of liberal—if not radical—transgression. However, by flouting the polite standards of the times, these films were always under the threat of censorship (motion pictures at the time weren't considered to be protected by the First Amendment). Therefore, exploitation movies approached their "forbidden" subject matter from a highly conservative orientation. Like other enterprising impresarios (such as Cecil B. DeMille with his erotic biblical epics), the "exploiteers" spent a lot of energy moralizing over the sensationalistic subjects they presented. The filmmakers put titillating content on the screen under the pretense of educating the audience about some urgent social ill (drugs, venereal disease, prostitution, teenage pregnancy, etc.) that Hollywood and other official information outlets were ignoring. After being titillated by the unwholesome images, the audience was dutifully reminded by the last reel (or oftentimes throughout the picture) that the social problem responsible for such titillation was a bad thing.

Moreover, the exploitation films often projected their anxieties concerning these problems onto a designated "Other," usually a group of people who were already on the periphery of society—the working class, immigrants, non-whites, even pregnant women, etc.—and whose scapegoating only affirmed middle-class prejudices.[3] The clash between this conservative entreaty and the sensationalism of the subject matter fissures the films' textual cohesion, and this internal tension remains the most intriguing aspect of the classical exploitation cinema. Given their compulsory conservatism, exploitation films viewed the Other with a sense of opprobrium. However, one exploitation genre goes brazenly against this otherwise persistent paradigm: the nudist film.[4]

For obvious reasons, the idea of the naked human body is often associated with sexual activity. So, when the nudist lifestyle in the United States started to be publicized in the press in the early 1930s, the public held the common misperception that nudists congregated together in camps for the purpose of having orgies or for some other blatantly sexual reason. However, nudist organizations constantly proclaimed that they only sought to enjoy the healthful benefits of the sun on their skin to the fullest extent possible. Moreover, most nudist camps were said to be family-oriented, with children and adults gathered together in a non-sexual environment.[5] Nevertheless, the equation of nudism with sex was pervasive, and nudist organizations found themselves having to defend their practice as a wholesome family activity. The Reverend Ilsley Boone, the founder of the International Nudist Conference and publisher of an early nudist magazine, wrote these words in his organization's "Principles and Standards" in 1933:

> Our goal is a healthy mind in a healthy body. . . . Sun, light and air are vital conditions of the human well-being. We believe that these elements are insufficiently used in present-day life, to the detriment of physical and moral health. . . . We aim to make the fullest use of sun, light and air by a program of exercise and life in the open in such a way as will result in the maximum physical and mental benefit. . . . We therefore regard the body neither as an object for shame nor as a subject for levity or erotic exploitation.

This extract from Boone's article appears in the opening crawl of a nudist documentary, *Nudes, Nudists, and Nudism Around the World* (1937?). Given the social climate of the 1930s, these words had a distinct purpose in the film. Unlike the pornographic stag movies of the time (which circulated underground and were shown in informal settings), nudist exploitation films were made to be shown legally in movie theaters, perhaps not the ones that screened grade-A Hollywood product, but standing auditoriums that openly played to paying audiences. Because merely putting naked bodies on the screen wasn't seen as having redeeming social value, the nudist films had to instill a sense of social responsibility into their subject matter. As a result, most—if not all—of the era's nudist films claimed to educate their audience about this emergent alternative lifestyle and its propagation of health through sunlight. But although the typical nudist camp included people of all ages and body types, the typical nudist-camp film would find an excuse to dwell on the camp's most classically beautiful female inhabitants. So, unlike the unapologetically erotic "nudie cutie" movies of the 1960s (whose best-known exponent is Russ

Nudists in a Classical pose

Meyer), the classical nudist films of the previous decades could be erotic only in a furtive way. Despite the prurience of their appeal, the films, at least on their surface, were forced to treat their subject with an asexual and antiseptic detachment. This three-way tension between nudism's non-sexual goals, the films' sexual exploitation, and their disingenuous denial of such exploitation runs throughout the genre.

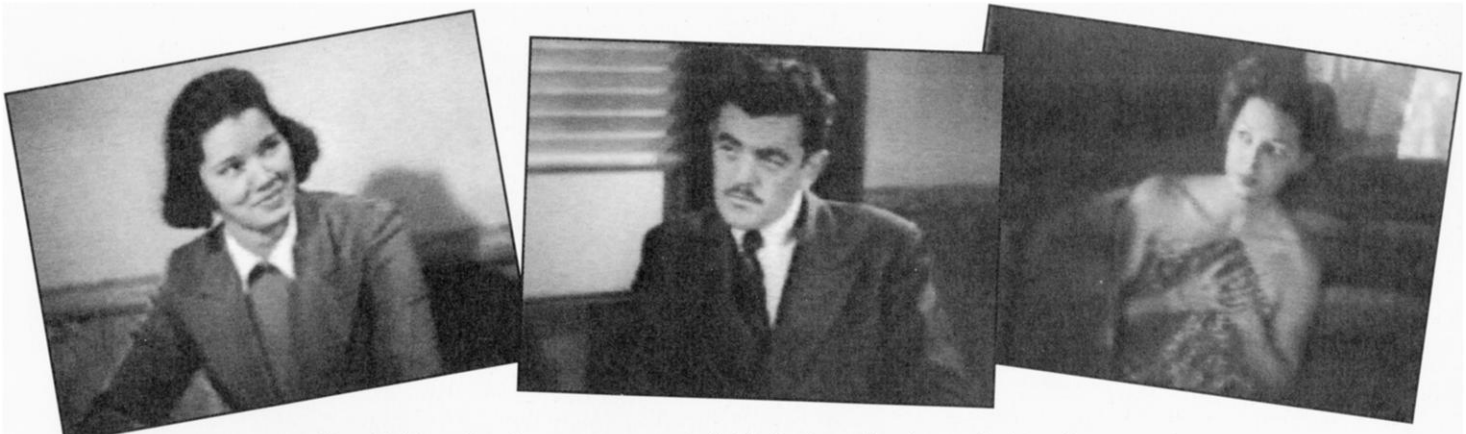
This isn't the only tension that permeates the films, however. Standards of the era dictated that genitals could not be shown on the screen, lest the movie be condemned as "obscene." Therefore, nudists had to be positioned in front of the camera in ways that wouldn't reveal their reproductive organs or pubic hair. One way that filmmakers dealt with this predicament was to position the naked bodies in still poses reminiscent of Classical painting.[6] By adopting this discourse, the films manifest Classical art's built-in strain between the "naked" (the unclad human body as biological fact) and the "nude" (the unclad human body as social construct). Consequently, the naturalism of the unclothed human body on the screen is often offset by the self-consciousness of its framing. Cloaking their use of nudity in the prestige of Classical art gave the nudist films a veneer of social acceptability. But the films incessantly imprisoned the human body in an uncriticized construct of social prohibition. The utopia promised by the clothing-free human form was instantly denied by the conservative constraints placed on how it could be shown.

Still, the nudist film is perhaps the least conservative kind of classical exploitation movie. Where other exploitation genres approach the Other in the spirit of condemnation, the nudist films approach the Other—the nudist—in the spirit of understanding. By allowing the audience to comprehend the naturist lifestyle, the films leave open the possibility that such a lifestyle might be not only acceptable, but even desirable. Unlike the other exploitation genres, the nudist film sanctions the sentiment that the audience might want to *become* the Other. Furthermore, while the generic topics of other exploitation films are problems that need to be conquered, the social "problem" addressed by the nudist genre is not nudism, but society itself. In the most widely circulated films of the genre, many of the nudists turn to the healthful benefits of unclothed recreation because their workaday world has made them sick. Modern society, in other words, is a disease.[7] Despite its conservative aspects in other respects, and despite the customary conservatism of the exploitation film in general, the nudist genre speaks to an underlying discontent not only with traditional attitudes toward the human body, but with the traditional social order. Therefore, nudism functions, at least in part, as a form of political criticism.

Although the nudist films were never politically "radical" in the Marxist sense of the word—their raison d'être as commodities and their precarious legal standing precluded any outright political agitation—nudism's unconventional solutions to anxieties stemming from conventional society, especially during the Great Depression, implicitly questioned the very foundations of that society: the drastic, taboo-breaking step of removing one's clothes in public intimated that complete correction of social dilemmas might require further measures equally drastic.[8] Of course, this underlying radical potential is not the nudist film's most pronounced facet: it's only one more discursive element that clashes with the films' other traits to create the genre's self-contradictory textuality. Still, the nudist films' radical aspects, and their failure to be fully realized, deserve further exploration. And the most intriguing text for such an exploration is *The Unashamed*.[9]

Unashamed

Rae Lane (Rae Kidd) works as a secretary to Los Angeles businessman Robert Lawton (Robert Stanley), who suffers from a multitude of imaginary maladies. Rae is secretly in love with Robert, but she believes that her dusky skin and non-Nordic features discourage him from returning her affections. Wishing to improve Robert's health, Rae convinces a physician, Dr. Malvin (Joseph W. Girard), to talk him into attending a nudist camp in rural Elsinore, California. Robert agrees to go to the camp, and Rae surprises him by joining him there. Although her stated purpose is to help Robert's recovery, Rae apparently hopes that he will



Rae Kidd as Rae Lane—secretary (left); Robert Stanley as Robert Lawton—businessman (center); Lucille Shearer as Barbara Pound—heiress (right)

fall in love with her once he sees how attractive her curvaceous body is without clothes. As the days go by, Rae and Robert enjoy their time together. Robert's health gets better, and he seems to grow more intimate with Rae. Her plan appears to be working. However, Barbara Pound (Lucille Shearer), a pharmaceutical heiress fleeing a royal scandal, stumbles upon the camp. Robert is immediately drawn to the fair-skinned Barbara and begins spending most of his time with her. Rae now feels neglected. After Robert stands her up one evening, Rae sees him kissing Barbara in the woods that surround the camp. The next morning, a heartbroken Rae kills herself by jumping off a rocky summit.

From a politically progressive standpoint, this story is noticeably non-radical, even given the more sexually repressive era in which *The Unashamed* was made: a woman sees her self-worth entirely through her relationship with a man; darker skin color is assumed to be less desirable than lighter features; the "less desirable" woman voluntarily withdraws from the romantic triangle by voluntarily withdrawing from life. However, what makes *The Unashamed* so intriguing as a 1930s movie is that it attempts to weave an integrated, character-driven, event-driven narrative around nudism in the first place.[10] Unlike other nudist films, it puts instruction on the back burner and diegetically integrates its nudist-camp scenes into the demands of story progression (despite how imperfectly those demands are met).

Like other nudist films, however, *The Unashamed* begins from a position of implicit discontent with contemporary society. The first dialogue scene takes place in an archetypal American setting: the office. In this particular office, Robert is the boss (and making the setting even more archetypal, the exact nature of his business is never revealed). Although Robert is on friendly, familiar terms with Rae (she calls him by his first name), he is clearly coded as one-up from her and the other office workers, all of whom are female. So, in both job and gender, Robert is presented as being at the top of the office hierarchy, and as such, he ought to be the most "powerful" person there. But he isn't: Robert is sick, or he at least imagines himself to be (one of the other office workers refers to him as a hypochondriac). In recommending the nudist camp as a cure for Robert's ills, Dr. Malvin tells the businessman that he needs "a complete change from this world of business and society, an escape—not to some resort with its formalities—but to a place where sunshine and good fellowship will make you forget your upset nerves and stomach aches." Not only are "business and society" unhealthful, but so are "formalities," which the doctor contrasts with "good fellowship." When we first meet Barbara, she launches into a tirade that's equally critical of society: "What they mean is: Am I going to finance their next war or keep their half-baked royalty in wine, women, and song? I am not!" Robert, the business boss, and Barbara, the heiress, hold positions of advantage in the social hierarchy, but rather than enjoying these advantages, they are suffering their ill effects, to which the nudist camp serves as an antidote.

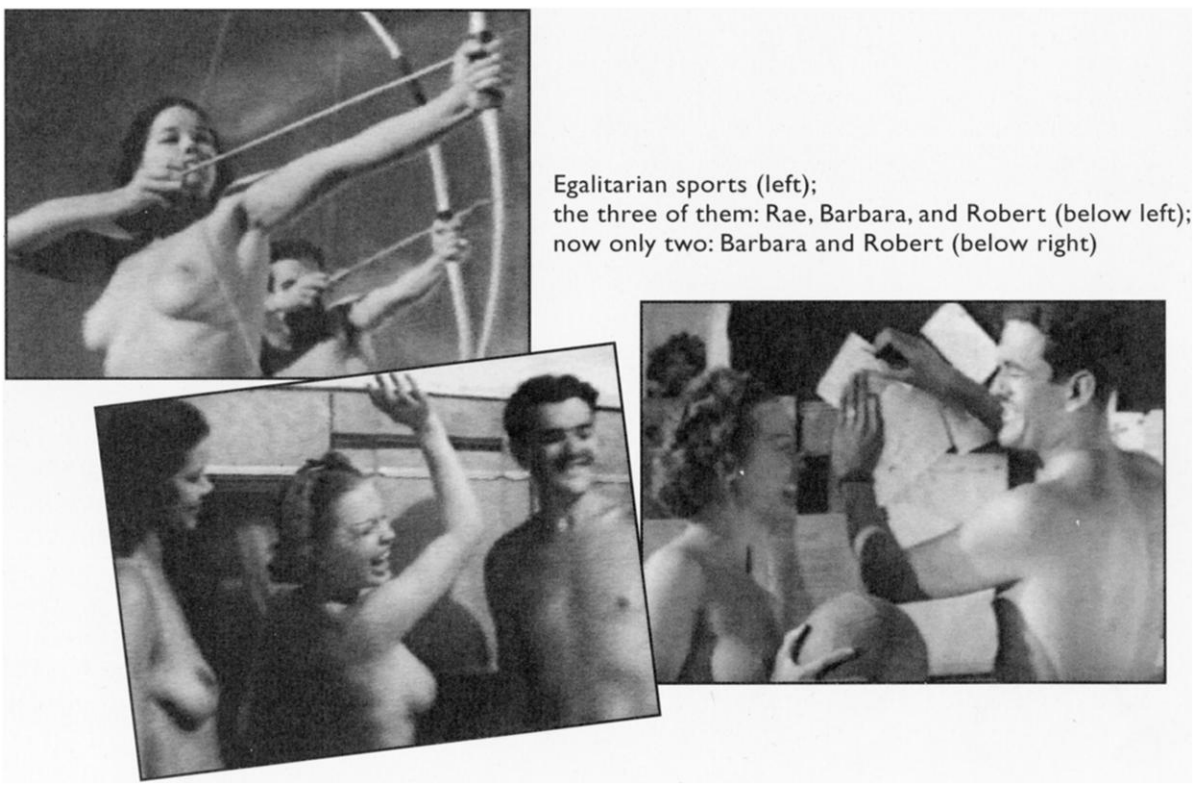
As Dr. Malvin intimates, the camp is a place of egalitarianism: clothing is removed as a social marker, and camp members are known only by their first names, not their occupations. The democratic orientation of the camp is underscored when Malvin tells Robert that he'll be staying in a rustic cabin, not a luxurious hotel. The campers are shown enjoying meals and recreation collectively. They also seem to share in the chores and enjoy both folk music and classical music, thus blurring "low" culture and "high" culture. Clearly, the camp

is a site for demolishing the hierarchical distinctions that Robert and Barbara embody in the outside world—a non-authoritarian utopia where the social boundaries insinuated in the opening need not apply. What's especially sickening about modern life, *The Unashamed* implies, are class distinctions.

But outside the camp, nudism and its positive connotations are associated with the working and intellectual classes, represented by Rae (a drop of golden sun?) and Dr. Malvin, respectively. Although they appear to be of two different social strata, Rae and Dr. Malvin are linked throughout the first act. The presence of nudist intellectuals at the camp further suggests a positive cerebral component to the clothing-free lifestyle. Nudism is *not* associated with the upper classes: Robert must be informed about nudism, and Barbara stumbles across the camp accidentally (she's initially alarmed when Robert and Rae see her naked body). To the contrary, Robert and Barbara must be taken down from their hierarchical places of privilege if they are to "get better." In order to survive, the upper classes must be rescued from below and assume a place of equality without class divisions.

The Unashamed visualizes its affirmative attitude toward nudism with the rough-hewn, bargain-basement lyricism of the camp scenes. The film is burdened by lackluster production values: cheap scenery, stilted acting, dubious dialogue, awkward editing, mismatched sound, and all those other telltale signs that motion-picture craftsmanship was secondary to the sensationalistic material. However, one advantage of the shoestring-budgeted genre film is that audiences bring to it lower expectations than they do to a more prestigious production, and one benefit of the nudist film (one shared with the "B" Western) was that most of the scenes were set outside: the audience didn't have to spend a lot of time looking at cheesy interior sets. *The Unashamed* makes poetic use of sunlight and landscape, of illumination and shadow. Even its nighttime exteriors are shot without the use of a studio, which is uncommon for the higher-priced pictures of the era. And despite the potentially eye-numbing ubiquity of undress, the startling incongruity of so many naked bodies in a 1930s movie endows the film—at least to modern eyes—with a somewhat surrealistic aura that endures to the final fade-out.

Where the other nudist movies of the time wear their pedagogical pretensions on their sleeves (if they wear anything at all), *The Unashamed*, through its integrated narrative, instructs its audience more subtly.[11] Dr. Malvin gives Robert the genre's prerequisite pro-nudist lecture, but it's a relatively brief soft sell: the word "nudism" is never mentioned, and Robert is quickly convinced. The scenes of Robert enjoying the camp with Rae are soon followed by a scene of the two



Egalitarian sports (left);
the three of them: Rae, Barbara, and Robert (below left);
now only two: Barbara and Robert (below right)

Clothed models . . .
Nude artists . . .

smashing his many medicine bottles—thanks to nudism, he doesn't need them anymore. And in one of *The Unashamed*'s most amusing and intriguing images, clearly played for laughs, a group of nude artists paint a pair of models—who are completely clothed in early-1900s attire. By this point in the film, the audience may regard the models' clothing as the diegetic painters obviously do, as costuming, as a construct, not as something natural and necessary. Considering that clothing the human body was de rigueur on the Hollywood screen of the 1930s, the implications of this image are especially insurgent. Granted, these brief scenes are ultimately swept up into the film's spectacularization of nude bodies and the overall eroticism of the romantic plot. But the film's lip service to nudism's subversive tenets, however obligatory, may still function as an (inadvertent?) internal critique of the text's exploitative elements.

The Unashamed, like other exploitation films, suffers its share of discontinuity: jumped stagelines, eyeline mismatches, imperfectly synchronized sound, and other rough edges that would have probably been smoothed over in a more expensive production. But given the cohesion demanded by its integrated narrative (demands not required of a found-footage nudist documentary), the film's diegesis holds together surprisingly well. And the plot-slowing scenes of inconsequential camp activity emerge as their own form of defiance against dominant cinema. These relatively mundane scenes in the camp—shots whose attraction to the audience was that they (with their forbidden content) were being screened at all—harken back to the novelty of early cinema, to the "actualities" of the Lumière brothers and others.[12] It's as though the film, to find a place for this "abandoned" subject matter, had to reach back to the very origins of the medium and, in doing so, recall a time before the "seamless," story-driven narrative came to dominate—and demarcate—popular perceptions of the moving image. But as *The Unashamed* looks back upon one filmic heritage, it also—rather curiously—looks forward to two others: the postwar avant-garde and the art film.

Toward the end of the movie, Rae follows Robert and Barbara into the woods surrounding the camp. All three wear capes or coats to ward off the night air. Unobserved, Rae sees Robert kiss Barbara for the first time. At that moment, a storm breaks out. Robert and Barbara run for shelter and find it in a nearby treehouse, where they continue kissing. Rae sees this as well and, downcast, trudges barefoot through the rain and mud back to her cabin. The next morning, she will commit suicide. Shot at night using exterior locations, this scene uses the kind of low-key lighting that would become the hallmark of film noir in the 1940s (a hallmark also necessitated at times by shooting exteriors at night with small budgets). The naturalism that previously pervaded the film is disrupted in this scene: a cutaway to a painted moon with animated clouds intrudes into the organic scenery, the first time that a synthetic representation of nature has displaced the genuine biota of the rural location. As the three characters walk

Rae observing, unobserved

through the woods, they are shown moving in herky-jerky, step-printed images, an unusual and unheralded visual strategy that endows the sequence with an eerie, oneiric ambiance. The practical, extradiegetic reason for the step-printing isn't hard to surmise: more than likely, shooting outdoors in low light levels required the cinematographer to slow down the speed of the camera in order to get a desirable exposure on the film; this would then result in a projected image showing the characters moving at fast speed. By step-printing these shots frame by frame onto the finished film, the action could be slowed down and restored to its real-time duration, but the movement within the frame would not appear naturalistic. Still, the sudden eruption of artifice into the film can be diegetically justified because it can be seen as an expression of Rae's inner turmoil. (What makes this particular anti-naturalistic use of step-printing in a despised and unsung exploitation film so remarkable is that it would later become the trademark of one of the world's most respected makers of prestigious art films: Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai.)[13]

The fragmentation of filmic space and time continues as the scene progresses. As Rae walks through the mud, the camera, low to the ground, focuses on her feet. Five different takes of the same basic shot—Rae's bare feet slogging left to right through the mud—are cut together in rapid succession. The breakdown of temporality and screen space contributes to externalizing the breakdown of Rae's mental state as she walks, ultimately, to her own self-inflicted death. (Intriguingly, a scene very similar to the one in this disdained movie would later appear in one of the most lauded and legendary avant-garde films of all time: Maya Deren's 1943 classic *Meshes of the Afternoon.*) The scene's disruptiveness marks a blatant break with the relatively coherent diegetic naturalism in the rest of the movie. Moreover, it's notable that nudity isn't present in this scene to serve as an "organizing sensibility" (Schaefer's term) and thereby hold the filmic fragmentation together (the characters' bodies remain concealed beneath their cloaks). The scene's bewildering breakdown of diegetic space and time skillfully harnesses the expressive power of cinematic discontinuity, a power distinguishable from the unintended bungling of the cohesive diegetic effect that is prevalent in so many other exploitation movies.

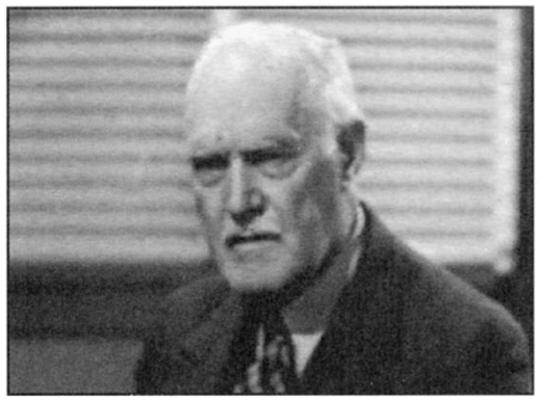
The Unashamed plays upon utopian yearnings: a world without sickness, a world without body-image anxieties, the crossing of social boundaries, living happily and reciprocally with one's neighbors (not to mention the smorgasbord of attractive, undressed romantic possibilities). The ideals that these yearnings call forth are deeply embedded in the egalitarian imagination of the United States. The insurgent irony of *The Unashamed* is that these utopian ideals can only be approached if the puritanical and hierarchical assumptions that underlie American society are cast off. And the radicalism of this undercurrent spills over onto the film's form when it presciently—if unwittingly—employs modernist cinematic interventions that question the self-containment of the narrative.

However, the movie's rebelliousness is only part of its textuality. Its implicit social subversiveness is itself subverted by the less liberal aspects of the narrative. Although the movie imagines a societal space where divisions between human beings may be transgressed, those divisions, by the end of the narrative, reassert themselves with a vengeance. And the issue that precipitates this wrathful retribution is none other than the "problem" of race.

Nudism and Race

From its very beginning, *The Unashamed* calls attention to Rae's ethnicity. The opening shot shows Rae writing in her diary, wondering if she will ever "find happiness." Dressed only in a slip, Rae looks at her reflection in the mirror of her bedroom vanity and rubs her face. A concerned expression wrinkles her beautiful brow. To the contemporary viewer, weaned on a larger (if still limited) range of socially approved female beauty, the reason for Rae's gesture and concern may not be readily apparent. However, in the 1930s world of the film, Rae's appearance is an instant topic of conversation. When a temporary worker comes to the office to relieve the departing receptionist, the newcomer quickly remarks that Rae has a "strange face," that she "looks like an Indian or something." Earlier, the receptionist says about Rae, "Her face wouldn't win no beauty prize, but she's got a figure that would make Venus blush with shame." Initially, we might be curious why Rae's attractive face "wouldn't win no beauty prize," but we can now assume that it's because of her "Indian-like" face and the darkness of her skin. The temp affirms this by saying, "Maybe that's why the boss doesn't fall for her." So, not only does the film instantly signal Rae's race as an issue of interest, but it posits her race as a problem.

The severity of Rae's "problem" is blatantly spelled out as the film progresses. In the next scene, Rae goes



Joseph W. Girard as Dr. Malvin

to Dr. Malvin and asks him to convince Robert to go to the nudist camp. When the doctor demurs, she admits that she's in love with her boss. Malvin discourages her: "Rae, as an old friend, I must warn you that you'll never find true happiness with a man like Robert Lawton. . . . I know that your mother and father were Caucasians, so perhaps were their parents and grandparents. But you, Rae, have the cast of another race. Your features will cause his relatives and friends, possibly someday he himself, to say that 'East is East, and West is . . . ' Well, you know the rest." However, moved by Rae's sadness, Malvin eventually agrees to talk to Robert, who agrees, in turn, to the nudist therapy.

At the camp, Rae surprises Robert when she unexpectedly ambushes him there wearing only a bathing cap. Robert is delighted and seems to revel in Rae's company, but he isn't as demonstrably affectionate toward her as she is toward him. Still, the situation seems to promise that Robert will return Rae's affections, especially when Rae and Robert share a toast together one night in her cabin (the two are clothed in this scene, discouraging the idea that they've had sex), and Rae suggests that they celebrate her upcoming birthday together. Robert readily agrees. Building up Rae's romantic hopes, this scene more or less concludes the film's first act and paves the way for the introduction of Barbara, who will ultimately dash Rae's dreams and compel her to commit suicide. But for the duration of this first camp sequence, Rae finds acceptance on an equal footing with Robert and with the other nudists, with whom she's shown eating and interacting. Nudism thus allows Rae to transgress not only class boundaries, but racial and (given her distinctive dialect and accent) national boundaries as well. The removal of clothing as a social marker portends the abolition of difference as a basis for discrimination. This sequence seems to contradict Malvin's warning: in the nudist camp, the twain finally meet.

The twain are pulled apart again, however, after Barbara's arrival. Trying to escape a pack of hounding reporters and the police, she accidentally enters the camp and, not realizing that the secluded woodland she's sought refuge in is a nudist retreat, she sunbathes topless. When the naked Robert and Rae come across her in search of their lost volleyball, Barbara (in the movie's most amusing scene) becomes self-conscious of her own nudity and tries to hide from them. Once again, body inhibition is associated with the upper classes. However, preferring the camp to the cops, Barbara decides to hide out there, and she quickly embraces nudism. Her more "classical" Anglo-Saxon features (lighter hair and skin, smaller breasts and hips) contrast with Rae's darker beauty and voluptuousness. Barbara and Robert are instantly drawn to each other and start spending all of their time together. Rae tries to lure Robert back by inviting him to her private birthday party. He accepts, but then apparently forgets, inadvertently standing her up. Rae goes looking for him and finds him having a drink with Barbara. After the scene in the woods, where she sees Robert and Barbara kissing, Rae spends a depressed night alone in her cabin. The next morning, she clambers naked to the top of a rocky peak and stands at the edge, her arm shielding her tear-stained eyes. From behind, the camera shows her silhouette standing against the cloud-covered drop. The camera then tilts up to a shot of the empty sky, and the soundtrack music reaches its crescendo. When the camera tilts back down, Rae is gone. She has presumably jumped to her death. "The End" quickly flashes onto the screen.

Although the exact ethnicity of Rae's non-white background (if any) is never revealed, her character is clearly coded in terms of the "tragic mulatta" stereotype. *The Unashamed* is unable to envision a way for Rae to resolve her racial dilemma outside death (for example, by winning Robert back, by getting over him and moving on with her life, etc.). The film ends by reasserting the exclusionary ethnic boundaries that Rae so troublesomely transgressed. Moreover, her (presumed) off-screen suicide sanitizes her death—we aren't disturbed by what would have been the shocking, guilt-inducing sight of her falling or crushed body—and this smoothes over the extremity of her decision. Situating Rae's nude suicide against a natural landscape, this scene naturalizes the compulsory withdrawal of the culturally inscribed Other from the dominant society. *The Unashamed* is a rather ironic title for this film because

Rae is ultimately ashamed—not of her nudity, but of her race.

Like the heart-broken Sappho leaping to her death from the Leucadian cliffs because of her love for the ferryman Phaon, Rae's leap from the rocky summit is the stuff of romantic myth (and the Greek references throughout the nudist genre make the Sappho legend a likely inspiration). But just as the legend of Sappho's suicidal leap sought to recuperate the lesbian poet's problematic implications for a heterosexual society, so Rae's suicide co-opts the potential radicalism of nudism's social critique for a sartorial society that fetishizes the naked human body. Her death affirms the racial/class boundaries that nudism's communalism and egalitarianism implicitly interrogated.

Distinguished from the dominant culture in terms of her race, class, accent, and nudist lifestyle, Rae is the movie's ultimate Other: everyone else at the camp is apparently white. Her status as a nudist and her ability to permeate social boundaries stress both the Otherness of nudism and her ability to bring out the Otherness buried within the privileged classes (although she inherited a capitalist fortune, Barbara's nickname is "Pinky"). By killing off Rae, *The Unashamed* does much to undo the troubling problems she poses to modern industrial society. Rather than winning Robert, and thereby appropriating the white upper class for her own ends, Rae inadvertently becomes the matchmaker to the elite (if not for Rae, Robert and Barbara never would have met).

On another level, however, Rae's removal from the story isn't so tidy, and her disturbance of the dominant still lingers. While the general effect of her off-screen suicide is to soften the harshness of her fate, and thereby make it more palatable to the audience, the fact that her suicidal leap and death take place off-camera —after the image has spent so much time building up to this moment—suggests something else: the inability of the cinematic apparatus to contain the Other completely. Rae's death is beyond the means of representation. So, to a certain extent, Rae is undying, and the political perturbations of her Otherness remain. In this light, she hasn't so much withdrawn from life as withdrawn from a mechanical form of narrative that insists on delimiting her to a position of disadvantage, a position that her nudism actively challenged. But to better understand this theme, we must go back and examine the deeper psychoanalytic structures that underlie the narrative.

Bodily display: Rae at the nudist camp.

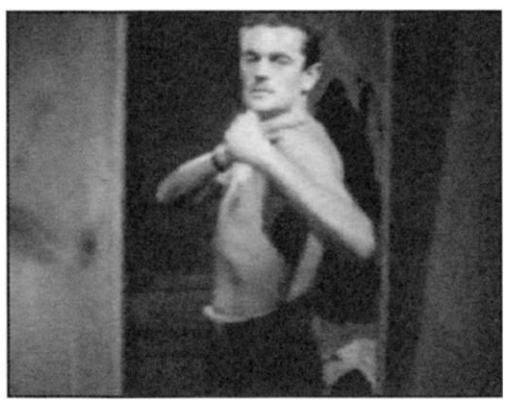
Naked on the Couch

Although Rae functions in the film as a tragic mulatta, she does something atypical of the stereotype: rather than trying to "pass for white" by downplaying her least "Caucasian" traits, she flaunts that which about her is most racially different—namely her "Indian-like" skin and "Venus-like" body. So, as self-conscious as she may be about her "different" appearance, she evidently believes that such an appearance is valuable enough to be desired by her boss, and that this value can withstand the unrelenting exposure of a nudist camp. Rather than denying her Otherness, she hopes to make Robert see its worth. However, it could be argued that Rae has troubled one stereotype only to uphold another: that of the woman as sexual object. After all, doesn't the image of the nude woman, the woman who strips out of her clothes to become the vehicle of erotic desire for a man, epitomize the disempowering objectification of women? On one level, Rae does indeed affirm female objectification, especially considering the context of the exploitation film as a commodity intended to titillate a primarily male audience. But the extent to which this is "disempowering" must be estimated by the function of her nakedness—a physiological state distinguishable from its objectification in culture—within the narrative. And Rae's status as a mere "object" is disturbed when the viewer considers that she exercises considerable control over events.

The Unashamed presents a female protagonist, a woman with a goal that she actively pursues. Existing within a cinematic regime that catered primarily to male spectators (the classical exploitation film), the movie is certainly informed by patriarchal imperatives. The most obvious of these is the display of the naked female body: Rae's nudity is, without question, a source of sexual scrutiny for the presumed male viewer.[14] Like

so many other female protagonists in American cinema, "in order to become the subject of desire, she is compelled to be the object of desire."[15] However, Rae's bodily display kicks the narrative into motion. It could be argued that by going after Robert, her superior, Rae merely hopes to possess his phallic power and thereby affirm a phallocentric narrative model. But as mentioned before, Rae seems less concerned with "ascending" to Robert's elitist level than in bringing him "down" to her egalitarian plane. Moreover, Rae does this by inducing Robert to remove his own clothes. In *The Unashamed*, the man is subjected to the woman's narrative control and, in doings so, makes himself the object of the gaze.

The irregularity of this as a narrative strategy, even in the context of exploitation cinema, is underscored when the bodies of Robert and Rae are shown undressed for the first time. In other films where the removal of clothing is important to the story, especially post-1960 soft-core pornography (where the generic disallowal of visible penetration is displaced onto a stronger narrative drive than is usually found in hardcore), undressing takes on momentous narrative significance. The character shown disrobing will usually be female, and the gradual unveiling of her body, fragmented by the garments, functions further to fetishize and eroticize her. But in *The Unashamed*, only Robert is shown gradually stripping out of his clothes, an activity that the camera shows in lingering detail (while keeping his genitals scrupulously out of camera range, of course). By contrast, Rae's naked body is first revealed to us in a sudden long shot by the poolside: she wears a bathing cap, so we don't really know it's she at first. But the camera then cuts to a medium shot and confirms her identity. The effect is rather startling (we have seen her mostly in conservative dress up to this point), and this deprives the viewer of any sense of "control" over her undressed image (at least at first). By keeping Rae's removal of clothing off-screen, the film minimizes the fetishization of her body in relation to Robert's. Moreover, in this scene, Robert clumsily falls into the pool, and Rae confidently dives in after him. Rae, not Robert, is in control. Robert, not Rae, is the controlled, eroticized object. The spectator positioning so typical of dominant cinema is thrown off-kilter.



Robert strips for the camera.

And on top of all that, this inversion of male and female narrative functions is presented in a positive manner—unlike, say, film noir's pejorative view of its manipulative femmes fatales and manipulated fall guys—and we find ourselves rooting for Rae's romantic plan. The strategic Rae is unlike the scheming femme fatale in another important way: the manipulative "spider woman," especially in classical film noir, is often marked as hyper-feminine, with her womanly clothing eroticizing her body and thereby helping to ensnare her hapless male victim. But by removing her apparel—in a democratizing, utopian diegetic environment—Rae also removes the castrating connotations of traditionally feminine dress. Her naked body suggests the potential to go back to a "ground zero" of female bodily signification and, in doing so, to conceive of a more egalitarian image of women outside the cultural circumscriptions of clothing.

On the level of patriarchal representation, the image of Rae's naked body (and those of the film's other nude women) is clearly constructed for the male gaze. But with the removal of Robert's clothing, the issue of subject positioning becomes more complicated. On one plane of perception, *The Unashamed*'s use of naked male and female bodies stresses sexual difference: obviously, the absence of clothing reveals the manifest secondary gender traits that distinguish men from women. But on another plane, the removal of clothing as a cultural marker encourages the viewer to observe these nudists for their similarities as well: we can witness the likeness of these genital-obscured mammals, literally stripped down to their biological basics, as united in their humanity. Difference in terms of clothing is de-emphasized, so difference is deprived of its function as a compeller of narrative. Of course, there's still enough voyeurism—and therefore enough diegetic conflict—present to drive the narrative forward, but the ideological foundations of this construct have been noticeably shaken. Perhaps for this reason, the film's narrative is neither "sadistic," in the sense of demanding a forceful story, nor fetishistically languid to the point of breaking down the diegesis. Given these considera-

tions, the fatalism of the film's final shot invites reinterpretation.

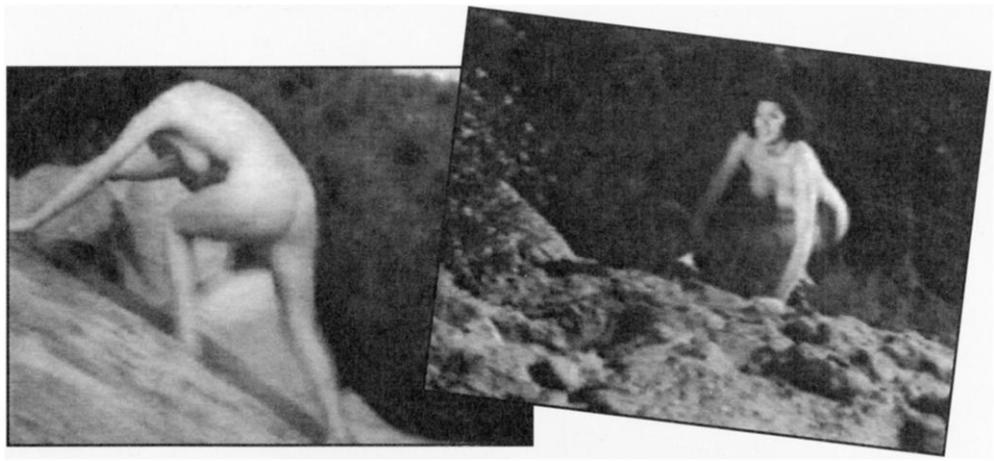
Rae races to the rocky summit, despairing for her relationship with Robert. So it may be argued that she is ultimately punished for the temerity of desiring to be a desiring subject, instead of merely a desired object. But there's still the troubling problem of why her "death," or even her "leap," takes place off-screen in an exploitation movie, a kind of cinema that ballyhooed its ability to show its audience a surfeit of spectacle. The interpretation that Rae is being "punished" for her desire is still premised on the centrality of difference. However, it is classical Hollywood censorship that calls classical cinematic structures of repression into being. Outside of the Production Code's paternalistic prohibitions, it's possible to interpret the desire that draws Rae to the top of the peak as springing from something Other than sexual difference.

The final shot of *The Unashamed* is the second of two important tilting shots in the film. The first comes at the end of an idyllic montage that shows Rae and Robert's happy, sun-filled times together at the camp (and just before the toast where Rae invites Robert to her upcoming birthday party). In this shot, Rae and Robert recline outdoors together, and she caresses his head as he sleeps. The camera then tilts up past the surrounding trees and into the cloud-strewn sky. On the level of manifest content, this tilting shot, with its noticeable camera movement, consciously foreshadows that of the last scene, where the elements of clouds and sky will again figure prominently. On another level, the blatant camera movement seems to associate Rae's affection for Robert with the nature that surrounds them. This reminds us that nature is responsible for Robert's recovery from his hypochondria. So Rae is also drawing Robert into the Imaginary, back into a situation of wholeness and plenitude with the mother (Mother Nature). In the first swimming-pool scene, when Robert clumsily falls in on his first day at camp, the image suggests his reentry into the amniotic waters of the womb, and his nakedness in the camp marks his rebirth. Significantly, thanks to Rae, Robert returns to health before Barbara arrives. Although Robert rejects Rae as a romantic partner, it's through her that he becomes healthy and thereby accedes to the Symbolic (via his love affair with Barbara) as an active subject outside the masochistic dilemma. Because of this, Rae acts as a mother figure, as the incarnation of the Imaginary—as the incarnation of Mother Nature.

Rae's love for Robert —and nature

Therefore, Rae's desire is steeped not in the Symbolic, with its insistence on social formation through the Oedipus complex and castration anxiety, but in the Imaginary, with its promise of plenitude in maternal unity. Moreover, after she first meets Barbara halfway through the narrative, Rae doesn't have a single line of dialogue for the rest of the film, despite her copious screen time. This may be interpreted as Rae reclaiming the preverbal in the process of subject formation. Although the kiss between Robert and Barbara—the kiss that sends Rae to the top of the mountain—functions as a primal scene, Rae's withdrawal from their world doesn't so much suggest her own Oedipalization as it does her rejection of it. She displaces the male subjectivity of the Symbolic with a proposed female subjectivity, and in doing so, she allows for the possibility of a non-patriarchal, non-Oedipalized spectator and a discourse not dependent on a "sadistic" narrative drive.

So, in this context, it's possible to read the last shot not as Rae's "death," but as her ultimate union with the Imaginary of nature. The shot that tilts from Rae's caress of Robert to the sky suggests that her love for him is really a displacement of her love for nature, for the Imaginary. Rae facilitates Robert's re-entry into the Symbolic as a more fully formed subject, but she rejects a position for herself in that world, which so easily corrupts the Imaginary values that she represents. Rather than follow Robert and Barbara, child-like, back into the Symbolic world outside the camp, Rae instead consummates her real desire: her desire for oneness with nature. Although the viewer at first supposes that Rae has fallen downwards off the summit in the last shot, the camera moves intriguingly upwards to hide her disappearance—intimating, perhaps, that Rae herself has moved upwards, that she has ascended into the sky. Instead of signifying the fatalistic death of the desiring woman within patriarchy, this last image in *The Unashamed* may be seen, through the eyes of the



Rae climbs to the summit and contemplates her "suicidal leap."

alternative discourse that Rae portends, as her divine rapture with all-healing nature.

The Other Within

This interpretation, of course, raises as many questions as it answers. If this discourse is so disruptive, for example, why is Rae still situated squarely within the stereotype of the masochistic woman who kills herself over a man? Shouldn't a resistant reading of a text have greater support from its manifest and diegetic content? Could this essay merely be a disingenuous intellectual attempt to rationalize a "guilty pleasure," an "obviously" sexist and voyeuristic piece of trash? These questions speak to the compromised status of the alternative discourse that Rae suggests, a discourse that struggles to come into being but that ultimately isn't reconciled with the exploitative ideology of the film's narrative. It's this internal strain that makes Rae's "fate" elusive to the cinematic apparatus. The tension between Rae's prospective Imaginary discourse and the film's Symbolic narrative is directly linked to the tension between the idealistic aims of nudism and the mercenary aims of the exploitation film. Where nudism seeks to change Western society into a healthier, less repressive civilization, the "nudist" exploitation films—despite their lip service to the naturist philosophy—ultimately sought to capitalize on displaying the nudists' bodies to a repressed but remunerative public. So, while *The Unashamed* may be viewed on the level of exploitation as a clearly non-progressive picture, Rae may still be seen to embody a discourse that hews more closely to the transformative ideals that nudism espouses. Also, the very appearance of egalitarian nudity in this film during Hollywood's enforcement of the Production Code may function as a resistant discourse, as repressed content is channeled through a "parallel mainstream," so to speak, at a time before the American avant-garde had reached its maturity. That friction between nudism and exploitation—as a radical naturist narrative struggles to get out from beneath the regressive romantic melodrama—crackles beneath the film's surface.

Therefore, Rae's disappearance within the narrative may be attributed not so much to her desire as to her status as the racial Other. But this observation raises its own questions. After all, according to Dr. Malvin, Rae's parents were "Caucasian," so Rae should be, too. Instead, Rae bears "the cast of another race." Though never driven home in the film, the implications are clear:

racial identity is uncertain. A Caucasian by birth, Rae's identity as a white woman is ruptured by the emergence of something Other bursting from inside. And Rae's racial Otherness (real or perceived) clearly threatens the presumed wholeness of whiteness as an identity in general. On a practical level, Rae's uncertain ethnicity allows the filmmakers to indulge in taboo (for the era) miscegenation fantasies while at the same time leaving themselves a technical escape hatch. Still, like the potential naturist discourse struggling inside the exploitation film, a racial Other rustles beneath the homogenous veneer of whiteness.

But viewing Rae as the racial Other may seem doubly depressing: not only is the figure of the desiring woman expelled from the narrative, but so is the figure of racial fusion. The naked body of the sexually desirable female Other may be displayed for capitalistic consumption, says the fatalist, but it must ultimately not be accepted on an equal social footing. Nevertheless, the very desirability of the Other (sexual or otherwise) also speaks to the desire to transcend the self, the desire to go beyond imposed boundaries of body and culture. Although the racial and class inequalities that Rae questions remain in place by the end of the film, they are still disturbed by the abiding egalitarianism of the camp.

The film's internal tensions become most palpable in the final sequence, the "suicide" scene: in the morning light, a naked Rae leaves her cabin and clambers up the craggy slope to the rocky summit. She is shown pulling her way up the rocks and vegetation, occasionally slipping. The naturalism of her nude body blends with the sylvan setting. As she climbs, the film conveys her journey in many shots, some of which cross the stage line. This scene is also riddled with jump cuts within the shots, some presumably made to edit out fugitive glimpses of pubic hair. Lasting for a lengthy two minutes, this simple sequence, if removed from the rest of the film, might be able to stand on its own as an unambitious experimental precursor to the postwar avant-garde: its visual vibrancy and rough-hewn lyricism still engage the eye. But as part of the larger film, the scene is burdened by the narrative imperative and the sophomoric stare of the apparatus—most noticeably during the shot where the camera crops Rae's face to keep her bare breasts in frame. Still, the viewer is struck by the pressures within the scene: the lyricism of the image for its own sake versus its appropriation by the story line; Rae's communion with nature versus nature as a gateway to death; the disruptive editing versus the visual coherence of the sequence; the potential to perceive Rae's beautiful body as a socially unmarked biological entity versus the female nude as an object of patriarchal sexual desire. Nudism's utopian impulse grinds gratingly against exploitation's social harnessing of the human body.

Given the emergence of several submerged tendencies within the narrative of *The Unashamed*, it's only fitting that the film represents a kind of cinema that is itself emerging from many years of obscurity: the classical exploitation film, the shabby cinematic Other lurking within the glamorous sheen of classical Hollywood.[16] And the idea of "the Other within" isn't limited to the filmic text, but it also extends to the audience: beneath every suit of clothes is a naked body; within every attired individual waits a potential nudist. If this potential were to be realized, nudism would lose its allure as a subject for exploitation. Without the glaring disparity between the idyllic world of bodily freedom on the screen and the alienated world of bodily repression in the movie theater, there would be no need for a motion picture like *The Unashamed* to come into existence in the first place. And this irreconcilable contradiction of the film's genesis sets all the other contradictions into motion.

Robert M. Payne is a Hollywood-based writer and screenplay analyst whose articles have also appeared in *Jump Cut* and *East-West Film Journal*.

This essay could not have been written without the generous input and feedback of Grigoris Daskalogrigorakis. Thanks to Something Weird Video for film stills, and to Eric Schaefer.

The Unashamed is available on video from Something Weird Video, P.O. Box 33664, Seattle, Washington 98133, (206) 361-3759; www.somethingweird.com

Notes

1. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1937), p. 20.
2. Eric Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999). Two other books on classical exploitation cinema are Felicia Feaster and Bret Wood, *Forbidden Fruit: The Golden Age of the Exploitation Film* (Baltimore, MD: Midnight Marquee, 1999); and Eddie Muller and Daniel Faris, *Grindhouse: The Forbidden World of "Adults Only" Cinema* (New York: St. Martin's/Griffin, 1996).
3. Schaefer, pp. 13-14.
4. In a fascinating argument, Schaefer discusses at length how the burlesque film, where issues of Otherness are not as

pronounced, is also a major exception to this paradigm. See Schaefer, pp. 303-24.

5. Schaefer also includes a brief history of nudism in Germany and the United States, pp. 291-93. For more about nudism, see the Internet site Cybernude (www.cybernude.com), which contains links to other nudist Web pages.
6. Schaefer, p. 302.
7. Cf. Schaefer, p. 299.
8. However, nudist films were arguably "radical" in another context: the censorship front. Several nudist movies were banned from playing in some areas because the naked human body was deemed "indecent," and the filmmakers or distributors were often forced to fight lengthy courtroom battles that challenged and gradually rolled back America's obscenity laws. During a court case in 1955, another nudist film, *The Garden of Eden* (1954), dealt a serious blow to the censorship board of New York, which had prohibited the movie's release in that state, when the local Court of Appeals upheld a lower ruling that nudity per se was not indecent. This ruling enabled the film to be shown and paved the way for the fall of censorship boards in other parts of the country. For more on the censorship of exploitation films, see Schaefer, pp. 136-64, 294-96, 300, 327-30.
9. *The Unashamed*, a 1938 exploitation film, is also known by the title *Unashamed* and should not be confused with the 1932 MGM movie of the same name. As a rule, background information about classical exploitation films is sketchy at best. And, regrettably, I've been unable to find any behind-the-scenes data about either *The Unashamed* or its director, Allen Stuart. Therefore, my analysis is based entirely on my own observations, and not the filmmakers' intentions.
10. I subscribe to the proposition that, given Hollywood's dominance, all audiovisual media are viewed in a narrative context. Therefore, there is no such thing as "non-narrative" film. As Teresa de Lauretis puts it: "There is no image outside narrative, and no filmic image outside history, which is also to say the history of cinema including avant-garde and mainstream, classical and contemporary cinema." See de Lauretis, "Oedipus Interruptus," *Wide Angle*, 7, nos. 1-2 (1985), p. 35. So, by describing *The Unashamed* as an integrated, character-driven, event-driven narrative, I don't mean to imply that other nudist films are "non-narrative."
11. Most other nudist films of the era are proselytizing documentaries that encourage their audiences at least to accept nudism, if not to become nudists themselves. But another drama, Bryan Foy's *Elysia: Valley of the Nude* (1933), is so focused on its pedagogical, pro-nudist message that both its story and characters remain underdeveloped.
12. Schaefer discusses at length how the exploitation film is rooted in "the cinema of attractions," the spectacular appeal of the motion picture's formative years. See Schaefer, pp. 75-95.
13. For more on Wong Kar-Wai, see my discussion in "Ways of Seeing Wild," *Jump Cut*, no. 44 (forthcoming). See also Danièle Rivère, ed., *Wong Kar-Wai* (Paris: Dis Voir, n.d.); and Tony Rayns, "Charisma Express," *Sight and Sound*, 10, no. 1 (January 2000), pp. 34-36.
14. Laura Mulvey was the first to theorize that the cinema always assumes the viewer to be male, and cinematic narrative functions as a fantasy for the spectator to control the on-screen female image, which represents the threat of castration. See Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Movies and Methods,* Volume II, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), p. 311.
15. Pam Cook and Claire Johnston, "The Place of Woman in the Cinema of Raoul Walsh," in *Movies and Methods,* Volume II, p. 385.
16. Throughout his book, Schaefer discusses how Production Code-era Hollywood defined itself largely in contradistinction to the exploitation film. See Schaefer, pp. 14 ff.

Reviews

American Psycho

Director: Mary Harron. Producers: Edward J. Pressman, Chris Hanley, Christian Halsey Solomon. Screenplay: Harron, Guinevere Turner (from the novel by Brett Easton Ellis). Cinematography: Andrzej Sekula. Music: John Cage. Lions Gate.

What a difference a decade makes! When Bret Easton Ellis published *American Psycho* in 1991, he was universally reviled for his portrait of Patrick Bateman, a stockbroker/serial killer with yuppie—and cannibalistic—tastes. Simon and Schuster was originally slated to publish the novel, but reneged on the contract just a month before the book was scheduled to arrive in bookstores. Sonny Mehta finally published it in Random House's Vintage Contemporary series, and sold 250,000 copies. Mehta and Ellis both received anonymous death threats, including photos of Ellis with an axe drawn in his forehead, eyes gouged out. The National Organization of Women organized boycotts not just of the novel, but also of products that appear in the novel; they eventually extended the boycott to all Random House and Vintage titles. De facto censorship set in after publication: numerous bookstores refused even to carry the book.

In retrospect, it is clear that Ellis's novel was a casualty of corporate clashes, not conscience, for the real reason Simon and Schuster dropped it is that Martin Davis, CEO of Paramount Communications, ordered Dick Snyder, Simon and Schuster's CEO, to kill it, despite the objections of senior editors, who urged Snyder not to bow to corporate authority. What was Martin Davis's claim to fame before this fiasco? He produced movies, including all the *Friday the 13th* films. As other publishing houses continue to be gobbled up by entertainment conglomerates, corporate interference like this has not only become increasingly common in the last decade, it has become the norm. (André Schiffrin cites numerous examples of market censorship and self-censorship in his recent *The Business of Books: How International Conglomerates Took Over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read* [2000].)

What books did Simon and Schuster publish in the spring of 1991 when they breached the contract with Bret Easton Ellis? One title on their list was *Women Who Love Men Who Kill*, about women who fall in love with serial killers. By 1994, when they published Howard Stern's *Private Parts*, they had apparently shucked all conscience and fastidiousness. Other publishers promoted such novels as Susanna Moore's *In the Cut* (1995), an edgy portrait of a sex-seeking woman and a murderer, and Caleb Carr's *Alienist* (1994), with its focus on a monster-cannibal. The protagonist of Joyce Carol Oates's *Zombie* (1995) is a sex maniac; A.M. Homes's *The End of Alice* (1996) is a *Lolita*-inspired novel about a nymphet killed by a psychopath. Dennis Cooper and Will Self made their reputations with darkly satiric, often savagely nihilistic fiction: recent works include Cooper's *Guide* (1997) and *Period* (2000), and Self's *Sweet Smell of Psychosis* (1999) and *How the Dead Live* (2000). Many of these books are serious fiction, and share *American Psycho*'s motifs: the craven addiction to sex and commodities, the convergence of consumerism and psychosis in alienating urban environments.

The critical reception of Ellis's novel can only be labeled a media tirade. No book since Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* had been so poorly read. No one noticed Ellis's debt to *The Great Gatsby*, another tale about self-fashioning in a gilded age of greed. Reviewers also ignored the fact that cannibalism was a metaphor for the conspicuous consumption of Ronald Reagan's America in the 1980s.

If the novel is as simplistic as reviewers claimed, how could they overlook the satire? Ellis's parody of

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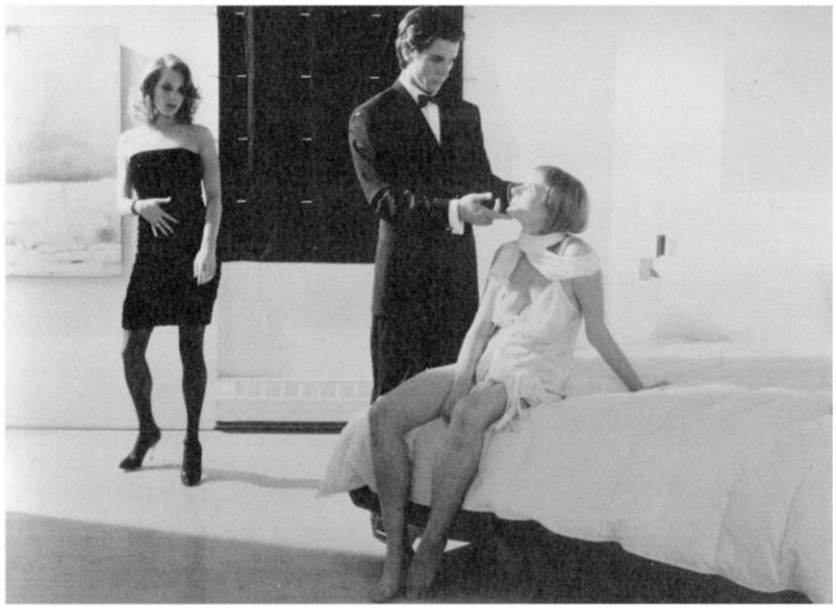


Krista Sutton (left)
Christian Bale, and
Cara Seymour

New York Magazine skewers the food and music reviews. Ironically, reviews *of* the novel duplicated the satire of reviewing *in* the novel, for most critics exhibited the herd mentality epitomized by Roger Rosenblatt, who wanted to "snuff this book." Rosenblatt assumed that Ellis and Patrick Bateman were interchangeable, despite the fact that the novel's repellent, emotionless prose marks the distance between novelist and narrator. In fact, not one word in the novel suggests that Ellis shares his narrator's sentiments. Instead, he depicts a society that fills every minute of the day with self-promotion in the tabloids and on the talk shows. Ellis invented an impressionable copycat killer specifically to skewer those critics who regard readers as mere dupes, incapable of distinguishing representation from reality, words from deeds. That is why his portrait of robotic consumption is so exaggerated, and why so many name-brand products are amassed in such tedious detail.

David Cronenberg, another Canadian who contemplated adapting the novel to the screen, told me in 1997,

> I was amazed at how good the book was. I felt it was an existentialist epic. . . . You invent a world where clothes and money and brand names are the value system and you are in the mind of someone who is locked into that. But inside that mind there is an awareness that it all is meaningless and artificial, completedly invented. And the murders, the hideousness, are an attempt to break out of that, to try to shatter it and to connect with something real.

It's an interesting moment in our culture when filmmakers are better readers than book reviewers.

Now, in the gold-rush atmosphere of dot-com billionaires and television game shows like "Greed," "How to Marry a Multi-Millionaire," and "Survivor," Canadian filmmaker Mary Harron (*I Shot Andy Warhol*) has audaciously brought Ellis's allegorical tale to the screen. Christian Bale (*The Portrait of a Lady*) stars as Patrick Bateman; his costars are Chloë Sevigny, Willem Dafoe, Jared Leto, Cara Seymour, Reese Witherspoon, and Krista Sutton. Cinematographer Andrzej Sekula gives the film a look as stylish as that in his earlier work, *Pulp Fiction*: all polished surfaces, sometimes tinged with glossy surrealism. The relentlessly upbeat soundtrack features 1980s groups like Huey Lewis and the News, which provide a satiric counterpoint to Bateman's grisly deeds. While preparing to off his first victim with an axe, Bateman maniacally delivers an exegesis of "Hip 2 Be Square." The victim, an uppity yuppie rival, must die because he trumped Bateman's taste. (Bateman's idols are Oliver North and Donald Trump.)

I spoke with Harron by telephone a month before the film's 2000 premiere. In terms of the controversy surrounding *American Psycho*, I ask her if she thinks it makes a difference that it was she who made this film, rather than a man. "Yes, I think it will make a difference. In some ways, people will look at it more *critically* because I'm a woman. But it feels like it's safer to people in some ways for a woman to do it. I think we (co-writer Guinevere Turner) had a more cold, detached view of the male character. We also tried to build up the female characters."

The film transforms each woman into a full-dimensional character. Bateman's shy, sensitive secretary, Jeanne (Chloë Sevigny), is devoted to him. "Have you ever just wanted to make someone happy?" she asks. The prostitute Christie (Cara Seymour) has a deer-

Christian Bale goes ballistic

in-the-headlights passivity, but she can barely conceal her loathing for Bateman and his rich friends when asked, "Did you go to Dalton? Did we meet in Southampton?" (Since Harron is Canadian, I ask whether she feels that affected her perception of the United States. She responds, "It does give me an outsider's perspective. I grew up in Canada and Britain and I think I definitely have a detached perspective on America.")

The film translates Ellis's minute attention to social forms and surfaces into an extravagant visual banquet. In the first scene, waiters serve exquisite dishes in an expensive restaurant. Presentation is all-important. "Consumption" is a portmanteau pun; it signals the excesses of crass materialism and simultaneously transforms "good taste" literally into a matter of life or death. Bateman has taste, but no gusto whatsoever. He is completely anesthetized by sex, drugs, and violence. "I don't feel one emotion except greed and disgust," he confesses. He only becomes animated when a rival's taste bests his own. Harron stages the scene where stockbrokers compare their handsomely engraved business cards like a duel straight out of Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns, complete with parodic close-ups. "I like Leone. I wanted the scene to look like a poker game," she explains.

Harron cleverly captures the atavistic narcissism and tedious repetitiveness of Bateman's world: obsessive-compulsive about his facials, his muscles, his music, his videos, and his food, he is a control freak who is losing control. Deftly played by a buff Christian Bale, he cares more for products than people. "Don't touch the watch! Or that robe! Or put that glass on that table!" he shrieks at various women who come to his apartment. Light bounces off his mirrored sunglasses and brass suspenders. His cardinal virtue is his "hard body"; exercise is one of his many autistic occupations. He favors activities that do not entail relating to anybody else. When he has sex, he makes love to his own image in mirrors; he wears a Walkman at work and with his fiancée. His passions are never aroused, even in the sex scenes, and when he dumps his fiancée, he tells her brutally, "We have no past. I have nothing in common with you." Like the Prince of Darkness, he is all polish, devoid of authenticity.

In another cautionary tale about inauthenticity and self-invention, Nick Caraway describes listening to Jay Gatsby's story about the sad thing that happened to him in his youth as being like "skimming hastily through a dozen magazines." Ellis updates Fitzgerald's fable of extravagant self-fashioning, for reading it is like skimming *GQ, Rolling Stone, Interview, Playboy, Hustler, Spy*. Just as Gatsby invents a Platonic ideal of himself, Bateman confesses (while peeling off a facial mask), "There is an idea of a Bateman, but I am simply not there. " Since all his cronies imitate what they see in ads, they all look almost like clones, and even the posh Manhattan pads become interchangeable as Bateman's sanity slips. In the wickedly deadpan scenes with the detective (Willem Dafoe), Harron evokes Ionesco's Theater of the Absurd and Luis Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. Harron explains, "Bateman is so bored and has so little personality or center that he doesn't know how to act, so he watches and imitates in order to get ideas about how to behave."

In this regard, Bateman is the dark double of Chauncey Gardiner in *Being There*: he parrots whatever he sees in popular culture. Ironically, censorship is based on that same monkey-see-monkey-do premise—the assumption that spectators will enact whatever behavior is depicted onscreen. Harron protests,

"There's a strange assumption now that if you show bad actions, it is somehow an endorsement of those actions. If you really take that attitude to its logical conclusion, then you simply can't make any serious films at all. It's amazing how prevalent that's become—it's the current new hypocrisy."

Brian De Palma once defended his films by saying that violence is part of the creative palette of cinema; violence is specifically cinematic. When I ask Harron whether she agrees, she ventures, "I think if you refuse to have violence in the cinema, then you will be leaving out many of the greatest American movies: *The Godfather 1* and *2*; *Taxi Driver*; *Raging Bull*; even *Saving Private Ryan*—it isn't one of the greatest movies ever made, but it's a very interesting film. Violence is prevalent in the culture, and De Palma is right: it's an element in the filmmakers' repertoire, whether they choose to use it or not. To say that someone *can't* use it is incredible. Even worse is when someone says, 'Oh, it's a good film, but I'm not sure it should have been made.' I don't understand that, because if it's a good film, it *should* be made!"

Harron adds, "There is a complete frenzy over violence in entertainment, post-Columbine and various other high school shootings. The rumbles in Washington about cracking down on Hollywood have made everyone jumpy. There's not just more censorship, there's more self-censorship, and I think there will be more and more self-censoring. A few years ago, the studios all wanted another *Pulp Fiction*, and now they're very scared. But their reactions aren't particularly consistent. Instead, they are somewhat illogical, because at the same time, they're looking for the next blockbuster like *The Matrix*."

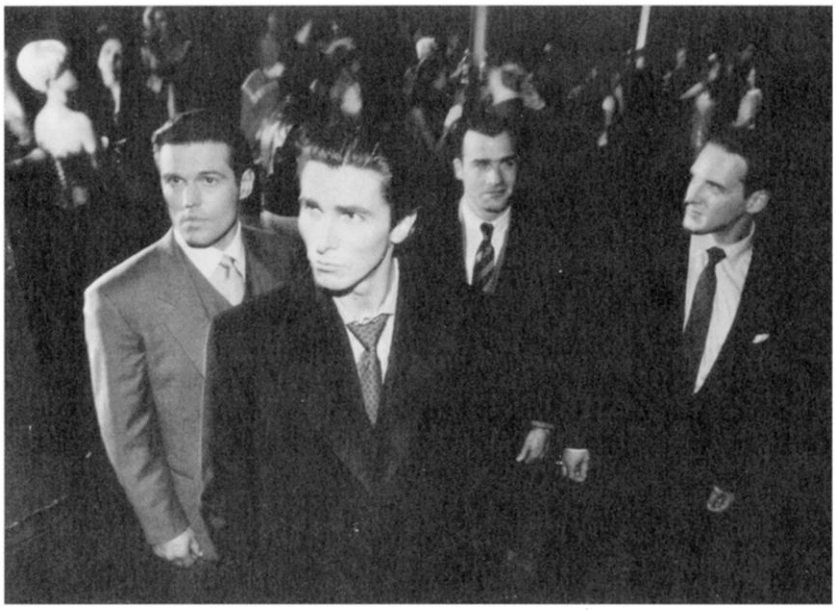
Harron's own work does seem to have an internal logic, for her 1996 bio-flick, *I Shot Andy Warhol*, is about Valerie Solanas, author of the SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto. Harron laughs when I suggest that she has progressed nicely from focussing on a female Man-hater (Solanas) to a male Man-hater (Bateman). Like *American Psycho*, *Warhol* focuses on an obsessive character who is fixated on the totemic power of celebrity. When I compare Valerie Solanas, a lesbian-marxist-feminist, to Andrea Dworkin, Harron replies, "I am actually kind of a fan of Dworkin's, even though I don't agree with her views on censorship. She's a great writer and polemicist, and a brave figure in what she was trying to do. I guess I have a lot of affection for the angry outsider."

Dworkin's novel *Mercy*, published a year before *American Psycho*, similarly depicts the predatory struggle between rich and poor. The protagonists in both novels go mad and end by murdering homeless people. Both novels, moreover, were targets of censorship. But if two novelists at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum concerning free speech can both be targets of censorship, shouldn't that perhaps make us more wary of censorship in general? Moreover, anyone can take a stand against censorship when the book is a masterpiece. But Americans suffer from a pervasive historical amnesia, forgetting that most major American writers were unheralded in their day until critics helped to rescue them from being forgotten or misunderstood, as was the case with, for instance, William Faulkner (his work was not only ridiculed, but prosecuted for obscenity; it was not until 1948 that the first thoughtful judicial opinion was written about the complexities of literary value, when Judge Curtis Bok freed *Sanctuary* and *The Wild Palms*).

Harron's film slyly alludes to the historical amnesia of American society. Who now remembers the Savings and Loan scandal, which costs U.S. taxpayers $500 billion while lining the pockets of Wall Street financiers like Charles Keating and Ivan Boesky? (Boesky is another one of Patrick Bateman's idols.) Who remembers that Ellis wrote his novel in the wake of the stock market crash of 1987? The closest Bateman will ever come to poverty is his bathroom poster of the Broadway show *Les Miz*. In a restaurant, he makes a vapid speech to his zoned-out friends: "Do massacres affect us? Apartheid, hunger, racial discrimination, civil rights, women's rights . . . we have to promote these things."

I mention novelist J. G. Ballard to Harron, because Ballard long ago predicted that a kind of fin-de-millennium panic would result in a harsh new Puritanism. Harron ventures, "The new hypocrisy is such that you're almost *required* to show positive images, as if that will make everything alright. It's as if you must portray all nineteenth-century women as suffragettes. I find it particularly disturbing when the historical record is distorted that way. Women weren't free; they were domestic slaves—completely oppressed. There's also this notion in Hollywood that if you present these kinds of saccharine, positive images, then that makes the world alright—but it's not all right! There's an unwillingness to look at reality."

Perhaps that unwillingness was the real reason for Ellis's negative reception a decade ago. As British novelist and satirist Fay Weldon remarked, "This man Bret Easton Ellis is a very, very good writer. He gets us to a 'T.' And we can't stand it. It's our problem, not his. *American Psycho* is a beautifully controlled, careful,



Masters of the universe?

important novel that revolves about its own nasty bits. Brilliant."

Bateman is the conspicuous consumer run amok, more predatory than Bruce the Shark. In the film, all those who service the rich (waiters, limo drivers, masseuses, dry cleaners) are minorities—black, Asian, Hispanic. Bateman's humiliation about his inferior business card prompts him to assault a homeless black man while parroting the platitudes of Reagan's social policy: "Just say no to drugs! Why don't you get a job? You have a negative attitude. You are a loser. I have nothing in common with you."

The film's final scene marks Bateman's total disintegration. He can no longer distinguish between fantasy and reality, but no one seems to notice. Framed in front of a sign that says, "This is not an exit," Bateman wonders, "Will I get away with it this time?" He suddenly sees Ronald Reagan on CNN. Instead of accounting for the bloodshed, murder, and corruption of IranContra, Reagan feigns complete ignorance. "How can one lie like that?" Bateman's stockbroker cronies ask incredulously. "Everybody's in denial," says one. Bateman has the last word: "I'm not harmless, but inside doesn't matter. All that remains is viciousness, mayhem, pain. I don't hope for a better world. There is no catharsis, no new knowledge. My confession has meant nothing."

When I ask Harron what initially attracted her to Ellis's novel, she explains, "The satire of the 1980s and Wall Street culture. But when we started writing the script in 1996, even four years ago, we viewed the phenomenon of massive consumption as well over. I saw the book as a period piece that had relevance today, but I thought of it as a bygone time—a kind of weird madness that was long over. It's odd how much has returned; the culture of spending that has come back is amazing. Society just seems to be awash in money."

To appreciate *American Psycho*'s satire, maybe we had to wait for the dot-com billionaires. We must have compassion for their struggles: A front-page story in the *New York Times* in March 2000 reports on "Teaching Johnny Values Where Money Is King"—about 13-year-olds playing the stock market. Another *Times* headline the same week, "Nothing Left to Buy: Pondering the Indiscreet Charm of the Superrich," echoes Harron's homage to Buñuel. Tabloid reality-based television shows now display a level of crassness devoid of parody.

Mary Harron braced herself for a controversial reaction to her film, but she was nevertheless astonished when a lawyer in Florida threatened a lawsuit while admitting that he had not read the book or the script, and had not even seen the film. Eleanor Smeal, the president of the Feminist Majority Foundation, announced: "There are no redeeming qualities to a misogynist product like this"—without having seen it. Patrick Bateman is the nightmare America created. In retrospect, it seems clear that the initial reception of Ellis's novel was a matter of "slaying the messenger." Sadly, Mary Harron's sly, fiendishly funny film has met the same fate.

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Kevin Spacey
and Mena Suvari

American Beauty

Director: Sam Mendes. Screenwriter: Alan Ball.
Cinematographer: Conrad Hall. Music: Thomas Newman.
DreamWorks.

If one were to go by journalistic and media chatter alone, there would be little doubt that *American Beauty* was the best film of 1999. Praise for several of the actors—above all, Kevin Spacey in the lead role—as well as the director, Sam Mendes, and the screenwriter, Alan Ball, was overwhelming, and so often repeated by now that it is easy to lose sight of exactly what it is that they are supposed to have done, although one is assured that they have done it remarkably well. Usually, the film is described as an assault on the emotional sleepwalking that passes for life in the American suburb; and something of the sort does appear to have been among the intentions of the director, who makes prominent use of aerial shots floating over the anonymous, tree-lined streets where the characters live. In fact, the regularity with which such descriptions appear ought to strike us as the first indication that something is lacking in discussions of this film. The suburbs have been so frequently ridiculed on the score of crass materialism and abject conformity over the past 50 years that it is a wonder their residents do not rise up, wielding hedge trimmers and pruning shears, to exact revenge on their metropolitan tormentors. At the very least, it should be obvious that a film has to do more than work over such hackneyed themes to command our attention.

My own view is that *American Beauty* is a vital but uneven film. Although it has little to say that is entirely new, it nevertheless manages to render certain experiences vividly, most memorably when it deals with the ways that teenagers and adults imagine each other's lives, as in the relationship between the protagonist, Lester Burnham, and his daughter's friend Angela (Mena Suvari). The spectacle of a middle-aged man genuinely, if absurdly, rejuvenated by the illusions of freedom and fulfillment embodied by an underaged girl is not exactly unfamiliar; however, like the most enduring literary treatments of this theme (e.g., *Lolita*), *American Beauty* succeeds as an exercise in romantic irony. In this regard, Kevin Spacey's ability to project an unflappable cool, even after his character has crossed over into ludicrousness, is a palpable strength; and at the end of the film, after Lester declines to take advantage of the girl's vulnerability, he comes to resemble the speaker in Keats' "Nightingale" ode, left bemused by the ability of his own fancy to create an unreachable paradise, but also brought to a greater humanity by the experience as a whole. For her part, the girl is the most believable teenager in the film. The energy she devotes to trying to live up to an unworthy image of herself is painfully familiar, and there is a nice symmetry in the fact that she is chasing empty images of adulthood at the same time that Lester is cultivating equally empty fantasies about youth.

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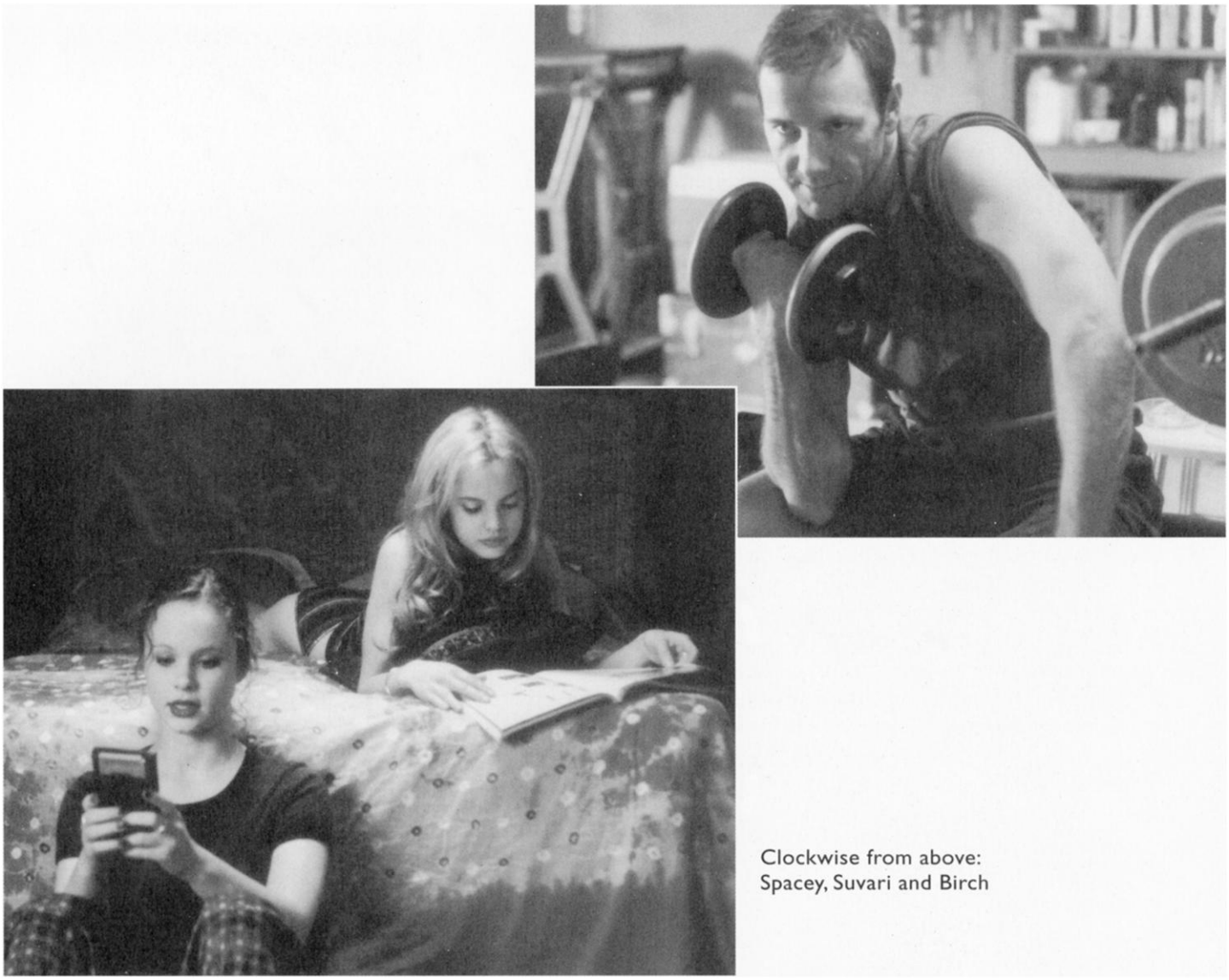
Unfortunately, *American Beauty* does not consistently match the success of this strand of its plot. The other adult characters, far from being original portraits drawn from contemporary life, are actually based on well-known stereotypes, which can be located historically with some precision and thus give the film a pastiche quality that coexists uneasily with its aspirations toward realist exposé. For example, Annette Bening's character (Lester's wife) is a familiar—but not necessarily welcome—figure out of the cultural criticism of the immediate postwar era. The historical origins of this character are even signaled within the film itself by her preference for Eisenhower-era show tunes and popular music—just the sort of taste to which a shallow woman of her generation would tend to feel superior because it belongs to the world of her parents (some of the more anodyne specimens of classic rock or contemporary radio pop would be more likely choices from the point of view of social documentation). Moreover, the ferocious mockery with which she is presented seems to come straight from the yellowed pages of all-but-forgotten jeremiads like Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* (1942), which ascribed the most bland and wasteful traits of suburban consumer culture to a phenomenon that the author called "momism"—essentially the claim that the backbone of the American family was being warped by the voracious, manipulative, yet contemptibly anesthetic tastes of a certain kind of mother, who was becoming more common and even getting the upper hand as a result of the American male's failure to be a man. Not only were such mothers trying to take the place of fathers, but they were also bound to raise troubled and rebellious children, since for them child-rearing was accomplished largely by means of bribery with the promise of access to consumer goods and pleasures. Wylie was prescient in his choice of terms, for he anticipated a growth industry in vulgar Freudian writing over roughly the next decade and a half about the figure of the bad mother and the harm that she does. In retrospect, this phenomenon seems an especially hysterical manifestation of the same mid-century male anxieties that inspired such far more interesting cultural documents as film noir, and the meaning of its reappearance at the end of the millennium is unclear. What *is* clear is that this character has at least as much to do with the less generous emotions that many men harbor toward women as it does with the lives of actual women in the suburbs today.

Even more plainly conventional than Lester's wife is the character of the violent, repressed homosexual marine colonel next door. This figure belongs to a somewhat later period, being a Vietnam-era bogey used by the counterculture to taunt its more hawkish adversaries, and is so obvious a throwback that some reviewers questioned its effectiveness. They were right to do so; the character is no longer terribly relevant. Interestingly, the imaginative weakness of the filmmakers' attempt to record the presence of fascism in the suburbs inadvertently calls attention to a less obvious problem with the handling of the film's main

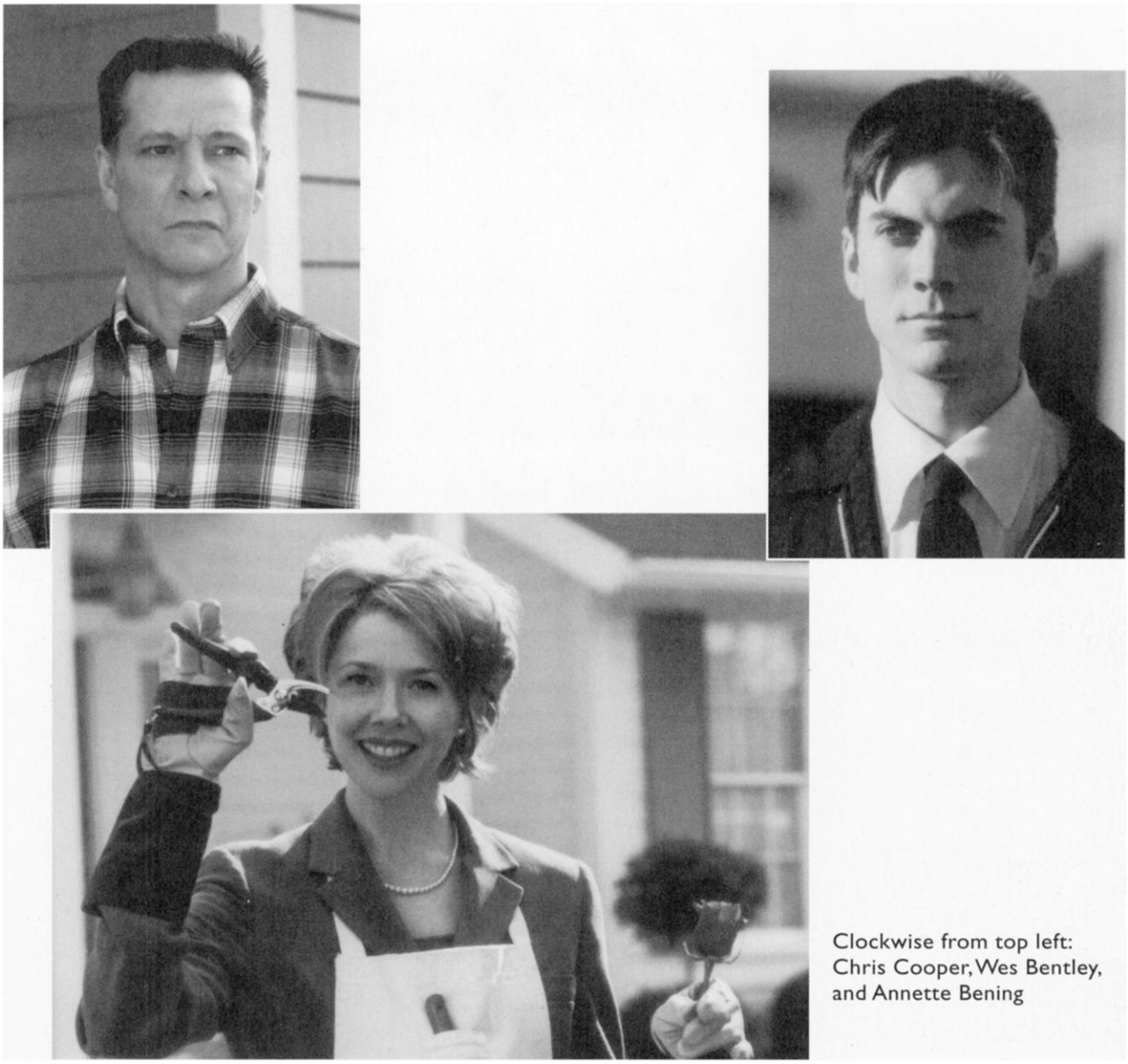
Kevin Spacey and Thora Birch



Clockwise from above:
Spacey, Suvari and Birch

theme. For the most visible kind of American fascist at this moment in history is not the intolerant ex-military man struggling with his own unrecognized urges, but the teenage skinhead or neo-Nazi thug. Such bypassing of contemporary reality suggests that, despite the ironic wisdom with which Lester's epiphanic moment is portrayed, *American Beauty* still has a tendency to invest teenagers with an aura of grace, and this problem is evident in one of the most interesting characters in the film: Ricky, the colonel's mysterious, drug-dealing son.

To be sure, there is much about this figure that is attractive, beginning with the charisma of the young actor, Wes Bentley, who plays the role, and much more that at least represents a healthy determination to break with received wisdom. Almost nothing has been said about the admirably firm dismissal of puritanical conceptions of voyeurism and visual pleasure in this part of the film. The filmmakers correctly see that all art involves the risk of manipulation, and that pleasure, including the pleasure of looking at a woman's body, need not be simply equated with sadism or fetishism. Rather, with the help of a video camera, Lester's self-denigrating daughter Jane learns to see herself through her lover's eyes, suggesting that such aesthetically informed ways of seeing are inseparable from human relationships and the growth of a mature sense of self. But then, having established the camera as a means of revelation rather than an instrument of power, the film falters.



Clockwise from top left: Chris Cooper, Wes Bentley, and Annette Bening

Ricky's prize video clip of a plastic bag blowing around tends toward an essentially religious conception of beauty, which distracts from what the filmmakers have to show us about its role in human relationships by locating the source of beauty outside of us in the world of things, or even somewhere beyond (as does Ricky's Wordsworthian monologue about a reassuring presence telling him that he need never worry). The curious thing about the plastic bag sequence is that it really is the kind of thing that a teenage aesthete might consider "deep"; however, the filmmakers evidently mean for us to be as moved by it as the kids in the film are, suggesting that Mendes and Ball, like their protagonist, are guilty of an unseemly degree of identification with teenagers. Even allowing that the children of dysfunctional families are often saner and more mature than their parents, one nevertheless comes to suspect that this uncannily cool-headed and clear-sighted young man is something of a fantasy figure, a creation of the filmmakers' own narcissism, and the character's staggering wealth does nothing to lessen that impression. It is ironic that the guardians of public morals worry so much about the ethics of portraying a drug dealer as anything but purely evil. What is really dubious is the idea that the question of income should be so insignificant a problem for an aspiring filmmaker about to go out on his own, and one respect in which *American Beauty* definitely reflects its own rather than any other moment in history is its willingness to include business acumen among the elements of this

otherwise rather traditional portrait of the artist as a young man. To first-time filmmakers, the dream of being able to finance one's own projects must have an irresistible appeal.

If I have said much about the individuals who populate the film's suburban world and relatively little about its plot, this is because *American Beauty* gives the impression of having been conceived above all as a set of characters whose stories are held together in a rather loose structure and were possibly honed a bit over the course of the project's development. (Evidence on this point is conflicting: whereas Kevin Spacey and Sam Mendes have gone out of their way to assert that the script was never materially changed, Alan Ball makes reference in the published screenplay to scenes that were dropped or rewritten during the shooting of the film.) In any case, unsolved problems remain in the final version. Although the stories that the filmmakers ended up telling are better than some they might have told, certain incidents nevertheless seem forced and inessential. For example, the framing device of the murder is simply a means of creating suspense; and the various attempts to deceive the viewer, beginning with the opening shot, are unworthy of the best things in the film. Eventually, the murder turns out to have been committed by the only person who could have committed it; the crucial scene between Lester and his object of desire is already over at the time that it occurs; and the young, would-be filmmaker has already made the decision to leave home for the big city. One need only compare this killing to the murders at the end of what was perhaps the most artistically successful film to appear in 1999, *Boys Don't Cry*, to see the difference between a gratuitous formal device, somewhat disguised by the carpe diem voiceover, and an act of violence that emerges inevitably from everything that precedes it. Without question *American Beauty* is a bold, ambitious piece of filmmaking that showcases some fine acting and reveals the considerable talents of its director and screenwriter in a variety of ways; it fully deserves to be seen and discussed by anyone who cares about American cinema. When the discussion has ended, however, one hopes that the participants will have made a genuine effort to sort out the film's strengths and weaknesses, instead of merely repeating the handiest clichés about its setting.

Gary Hentzi is Associate Professor of English at Baruch College/CUNY. He has published both essays and reviews in *Film Quarterly*, notably "Little Cinema of Horrors" (46.3) and "Peter Weir and the Cinema of New Age Humanism" (44.2).

Book Reviews

American Movie Audiences

From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era

Edited by Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby.
Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press/BFI, 1999.
$60.00 cloth; $24.95 paper.

For most of my life, the admonition "the audience is listening" has always preceded the public exhibition of a motion picture. Yet I am struck that it is only recently that cinema studies scholars began listening to the audience. Traditionally, film scholars have viewed spectator responses to motion pictures as the products of tendencies intrinsic to the film texts themselves. They have sutured, interpellated, and subject-positioned audiences, but only recently have they allowed these spectators to speak for themselves. The availability of source material accounts, in part, for the emphasis on cinematic texts; celluloid has survived, whereas the audience's presence in motion picture theaters disappeared when they exited each performance. To circumvent the problem of the ephemeral nature of audience responses, Janice Radway, David Morley, and others surveyed spectator reactions to texts shortly after they saw them.[1] But what about audiences from the early period of cinema? Social historians such as Roy Rosenzweig, Kathy Peiss, and Miriam Hansen demonstrated that it is possible to reconstruct, using primary source documents, the ways in which historical audiences understood, negotiated, and spent their leisure time and money at the movies.[2]

The ten essays in this anthology represent the next generation of scholarship involving the resurrection of early movie audiences. Editors Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby compiled the volume, the first in a series of four anthologies, from presentations delivered at a 1998 conference on audiences sponsored by the University College London. These authors attempt to locate motion picture consumers in the United States, from the earliest exhibitions through the coming of sound, who can no longer be screened by researchers, who did not leave easy-to-find records of their moviegoing experiences, and whose memories of their time in darkened cinema houses have long since faded.

Though the editors divide the anthology into three sections, "The Social Formulations of Audiences," "The Politics of Audiences," and "Audiences and the Coming of Sound," all of the essays engage two critical themes: the degree to which the cinematic experience homogenized spectators across class, ethnic, and geographic lines and the idea that motion picture audiences were more than simply film consumers. With respect to the first theme, the authors offer a variety of responses. The three authors who write about ethnic and racial spectatorship agree that motion pictures did not foster a homogenized, "American" identity among these audiences. Judith Thissen, looking at Jewish immigrants in New York City during the nickelodeon period, argues that theater managers on the East Side introduced more Yiddish vaudeville acts at the time movies were thought to play a significant assimilatory role in the lives of New York City immigrants, thereby reinforcing their ethnic identity. Georgio Bertellini, observing the reactions of New York City's southern Italian immigrants to a particular genre of Italian films, historical re-enactments, concludes that though these immigrants lived in the United States, they used the films to forge a greater link to cultural expressions of Italian nationalism. "It was only in New York," he writes, "that Italy's Southern population experienced an intense, albeit idealized image of their nation, as it was mediated by Italian movies"(37). Allison Griffiths and James Latham take the theme a step further in their exploration of African-American theaters in Harlem. They suggest that not only did motion pictures fail to bring African-American audiences into a homogenized "American" culture, but responses to motion pictures in Harlem reveal divisions, along class and regional lines, embedded in the racially homogeneous community. The appeals of high-brow African-American critics for collective action to improve the portrayal of racial images in American cinema, for instance, were met with inactivity on the part of the working-class and Southern migrant members of the black community in Harlem.

Other authors believe that the cinema was an agent in the process of cultural homogenization. Leslie Midkiff DeBauche, in her essay on Milwaukee exhibition during WWI, argues that local exhibitors, following the advice of nationally circulated motion-picture trade papers, encouraged the largely German, socialist-leaning audiences to support the United States' war effort. Rather than offer their theater space for use as a forum to voice local concerns about the war, Milwaukee's exhibitors conformed to wartime marketing strategies implemented by theater owners throughout the country. Lee Grieveson claims that behind the Chicago censorship campaigns of 1907 was an impulse to regulate the perceived "unruly" immigrant and working-class audiences. As the locus of censorship passed from the city police to reform boards headed by private concerns, moving picture producers cemented a cinematic style designed "to create a spectator response and minimize the potential dangers of 'diverse and sometimes unpredictable acts of reception that threatened various forms of disorder'"(87).

A few of the authors complicate the question of the homogenizing power of the cinema. Steven Ross, in his analysis of worker-produced films, concludes that until WWI, motion pictures offered a wide range of class-based visions. A combination of powerful anti-labor advocacy groups, federal government crackdowns on organized labor, and the oligopolization of the film industry forced the more radical pro-labor films from theaters. Kathryn Fuller proposes that because the "cinema of attractions" lingered in rural areas long after urban audiences experienced a dominant shift to narrative cinema, small-town audiences experienced motion pictures differently than did their counterparts in large cities. Gregory Waller, also exploring small-town audiences, produces perhaps the most complex argument on

the homogenization of the audience. Waller explains that small-town Kentucky theaters in the 1930s simultaneously promoted a sense of local, regional, and homogenized national identity. These exhibitors served many civic functions in the community, promoted local businesses, and tried to book motion pictures containing Kentucky themes. Yet Waller is careful to note that the presence of live country-music performances in these movie theaters was, perhaps, less an expression of regionalism or localism than a part of the nationally organized country music industry. "We might consider the independent exhibitor who booked such acts," he writes, " as simply one part of a radio-driven loop, who thereby promoted the standardization of entertainment. [But] . . . it was, at the same time, a means of reaffirming the movie theater's local status and even claiming—if indirectly—some sort of regional affiliation" (176).

Readers will be impressed by the variety of topics covered by these essays and the diversity of primary source material used by the authors, but may be disappointed by the omission of any contributions dealing specifically with gender and family audiences. This is surprising, given the attention paid to female spectatorship over the last decade. Moreover, though the authors utilize an impressive array of primary source material, some of the contributors rely too heavily on local newspapers and ignore relevant sources like manuscript collections, the manuscript census, property ownership records, and the papers of civic organizations, resulting in arguments that are provocative, but less convincing than they could be.

The format of the book is also a mixed blessing. Because the contributions are conference presentations, the implications of some of the authors' findings remain unexplored. Fuller, for instance, does an outstanding job of describing the persistence of elements of the "cinema of attractions" in rural areas, but does not explain the significance of this observation. Griffiths and Latham illustrate the diversity within the Harlem moviegoing community, but fall short when they propose to link the discourse surrounding the regulation of motion pictures to the Harlem Renaissance.

On the other hand, the brevity of the chapters and the clarity with which the authors state and situate their arguments in the context of existing secondary literature make this anthology ideal for use in both undergraduate and graduate classes. The essays certainly represent the vanguard of current research in film history, and point to many fruitful directions of future research, both intellectual and methodological. Lastly, the volume encourages film scholars to look for audiences and spectators outside as well as inside the motion picture theater. Film historians, it seems, are finally listening to the audience.

George Potamianos is the author of *Hollywood in the Hinterlands: Mass Culture in Two California Communities* and the coeditor, with Kathryn Fuller, of *Beyond the Bowery: The Cinema and Mass Entertainment in Small-Town America from Its Origins through the Multiplex* (both forthcoming from the University of California Press).

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1. Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) is the classic work in this area of scholarship. See also David Morley, *The "Nationwide" Audience* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).
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Experimental Ethnography

The Work of Film in the Age of Video

By Catherine Russell. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999. $64.95 cloth; $21.95 paper.

Despite the contemporary implication of its title, Catherine Russell's ambitious project spans a century of film- and video-making, with half of the book devoted to the silent cinema period. Russell uses close textual analysis to reconsider 35 films and videos from the early silent period to the present that have "fallen through the disciplinary gaps of films history" (xi). The act of "re-seeing" is central to Russell's approach, since the films she identifies as experimental ethnographies (including examples from early cinema, the American avant-garde, and contemporary video-making) become legible only through a recuperative gaze. Russell's use of the term "ethnographic" is expansive, not limited to films arising from anthropological fieldwork, but instead functioning as a reading strategy for considering acts of cultural representation and inscription in an eclectic range of non-mainstream filmmaking. Within this schema, Russell argues, ethnography refers less to the representation of culture than to a discourse of culture in representation (xvii).

Russell re-reads canonical and lesser-known avant-garde films and videos as examples of a "subversive" ethnographic practice; she sees many correspondences between ethnographic and experimental film (including their common marginal and underfunded relation to mainstream filmmaking) and makes a convincing case for the heuristic value of broadening the definition of ethnographic cinema, especially in relation to avant-garde cinema and experimental video. But Russell is concerned not only with recuperating films from the margins of cultural production, but also in analyzing how documentary filmmakers mine the ethnographic film archive for artistic allegories and resignify archival footage in politically charged acts of cultural self-determination. Found footage, Russell argues, resembles salvage ethnography (the attempt to represent purportedly dying cultures before they

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vanish), since both are concerned with rescuing, redeeming, or mourning the loss of an earlier stage of existence.

Russell's book is thematically rather than chronologically organized, with filmic texts creatively juxtaposed to reveal their exemplary status as "experimental ethnography." For example, after laying out the term experimental ethnography in the first chapter, Russell traces the conjunction of ethnography and surrealism in Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes* and Tracey Moffatt's *Night Cries*. Organizing her discussion of Buñuel's film around issues of textual reliability (whether we believe what we see), discourses of primitivism, and the iconography of sacrifice and death, Russell argues that *Las Hurdes* incorporates a number of important ideas about the "politics of representation in anthropological cinema" (31). However, having rejected traditional ethnographic filmmaking as an epistemological yardstick in her introduction and first chapter, Russell's introduction of the term anthropological cinema in relation to Buñuel's film is somewhat confusing. Furthermore, the terms ethnographic or anthropological film become something of a straw man in Russell's argument. In her preface, for example, she refers to her desire to circumvent the "empiricism and objectivity conventionally linked to ethnography" (xi), and elsewhere in the book she describes Peter Kubelka's filmmaking as being "free of the scientism of ethnography" (128). While it is understandable for Russell to differentiate the filmmaking practice she considers ethnographic from traditional constructions of ethnography, she might have included some disclaimers about the generic diversity within the universe of ethnographic film before diagnosing all of the work as suffering from fatal doses of empiricism and scientism.

This issue may be related to Russell's frequent recourse to broadly drawn theoretical assertions in addressing films from the early cinema period, and there are times when her reliance on theory overwhelms the textual richness (and indeterminacy) of the films themselves. For example, when Russell concludes that "early films of native peoples become legible as documents of colonialism, not documents of native peoples" (58), there seems little space here for the possibility of multiple readings, since such films are always, in Russell's view, overdetermined by the larger colonial context. While reading these films as allegories of the colonial gaze is productive (and Russell acknowledges its intrinsic ambivalence, its status as a site of both "power and resistance"), Russell sometimes underestimates the complexity of the "looking relations" (to borrow Jane Gaines's term) between filmmaker and filmed during the early cinema period. On many levels, the textual openness of many early nonfiction films makes them ideal candidates for reconsideration as experimental ethnography. Indeed, the textual practices of many early nonfiction films are so contradictory (and implicated in diverse precinematic practices not addressed by Russell) that they might be seen as subversive metacommentary on the fragility of the colonial context as much as univocal records of colonial subjugation.

Elsewhere in the book, Russell's analysis of the corporeality of early cinema, including her discussion of *From the Pole to the Equator,* brings a number of fresh perspectives to bear on a still under-theorized area of early cinema research. In addition, chapter 4, "Ethnotopias of Early Cinema," insightfully explores the "Living Canada" series, promotional films designed to boost British immigration to Canada at the turn of the nineteenth century. Russell's consideration of the transformation of the ethnographic "view" in films made at the start and finish of the silent cinema period (she ends the chapter with an analysis of a British propaganda film entitled *Tour of the Dominions,* made in 1927) is productive, particularly her argument about the legibility of the social body as a colonial fantasy, "an ethnographic form of the optical unconscious" (87). Her larger argument about the prehistory of the documentary being repressed because of its "visual epistemology" is also well taken, and her reading of Méliès's *Voyage dans la lune* as postmodern ethnography (she views it as a kind of ur-text) is made more insightful through her analysis of how the film is quoted in Brazilian filmmaker Paul Gaitan's 1988 film, *Uaka.*

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete. Rebecca Simon, Journals Director

Bringing the first half of the book to a close is an excellent chapter on photographer Edward Sheriff Curtis, whose 1914 film, *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*, was restored and re-released by anthropologists Bill Holms and George Quimby in 1973 under the title *In the Land of the War Canoes*. Viewing the film as an "authentically inauthentic text," Russell makes a compelling case for how the film might be viewed as a "premodern film that anticipates many of the elements of postmodern ethnography" (98). Most striking about Russell's analysis of *Head-Hunters,* however, is her discussion of the film as a form of "redemptive ethnography" for the Kwakuitl people, who collaborated with Holms and Quimby in the restoration. Ironically, the changes to the original Curtis film often serve to disrupt its narrative flow by radically cutting the number of intertitles, thereby privileging the image over narrative explication. Grounded in detailed contextual information concerning both the original project and the resurrected film, this chapter becomes the linchpin of Russell's argument, its central location in the book underscoring its status as an exemplary discussion of experimental ethnography.

Shifting her attention to structural films in chapter 7 (which includes an excellent discussion of Warhol's cinema as meditative experiments in the art of looking), Russell then devotes her attention to films shot with more overt ethnographic content in chapter 8, which takes as its focus possession rituals filmed by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, Maya Deren, and Jean Rouch. Russell's concept of possession as an unrepresentable mise-en-abîme in which the "body becomes the signifier of that which has no referent" is convincingly demonstrated in her discussion of these canonical films, and the chapter also serves as a useful theoretical bridge to the exploration of found footage as ethnography in the next chapter. Just as the ethnographic film archive functions as a cultural mnemonic for that which has passed and cannot be shown, so too is the act of possession, which assumes many of the dream-like qualities of film fragments that bear the burden of historical legibility. Describing found footage as an "aesthetic of ruins," Russell argues that the body has a very different status in found footage than in ethnography, since the footage is no "longer representative of culture but an element of culture, a signifier of itself" (197). Striking in its omission from this chapter, however, is *From the Pole to the Equator,* which Russell chose to analyze earlier in the book in the context of the ethnographic body. Yet while reading this chapter, one can't help wonder how Russell's arguments about the cultural and textual politics of using found footage might be inflected by *Pole to the Equator,* arguably one of the most provocative incorporations of found ethnographic footage.

Russell concludes her book with a chapter on autoethnography, a term coined by Mary Louise Pratt, in relation to Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*. Marker's palimpsestic film is an apt concluding case study for Russell's investigation of experimental ethnography, demonstrating how the diary film in its confessional essay form can make problematic many of the precepts of the traditional documentary. Using Marker's film, Russell makes a final case for the textual and ideological variances of experimental ethnography and its usefulness as a reading strategy in film studies. Crossing the conventional boundaries between documentary, Hollywood, and avant-garde filmmaking, *Experimental Ethnography* makes an important contribution to our understanding of how a wide range of film practices have engaged with the problems of visuality, authenticity, and the prosaic.

Alison Griffiths is an assistant professor in the Department of Speech at Baruch College, City University of New York.

Heroes in Hard Times

Cop Action Movies in the U.S.

By Neal King. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1999. $59.50 cloth; $19.95 paper.

The American cop movie has for some time now been typified by the likes of *48 Hours, Lethal Weapon, Die Hard,* their sequels, and dozens of unremembered others which passed briefly through our malls to meld into a common Reagan-era memory of tortured muscle, depraved villainy, and cheesy epigrams. There are times even now when every bit of corruption and cupidity in the aesthetic sense of our time seems squeezed into the latest 30-second TV spot for the latest Schwarzenegger action apocalypse. Unlike Neal King, I am not a fan of the modern crime drama.

Which is partly why King's study is good to read. In fact, it might prove *most* enlightening to those of us who have tended to disdain this impoverished, headachey genre. In straight-talk prose, King takes account of the prejudices many readers will bring to his subject; certainly he can't be accused of sidestepping the toughest objections to these movies. In successive chapters he regards them through prisms of gender, race, and economics; the longest chapter is on the symbolism of sodomy. He quotes a host of critics' complaints about racism, misogyny, and homophobia, and allows them their validity. But he is explicit in offering an alternative to standard interpretations of the genre's recurring themes and dynamics—essentially, that they support white male hegemony and enforce the subjugation of women and ethnic minorities. Against each detraction he formulates a genre-inclusive reading which tends to give "cop action" (his designation) the benefit of every doubt. Readily admitting that he derives enjoyment and even an "erotic rush" from "fire storms, fist fights, and car chases" (175), King does not defend cop action so much as seek thematic coherence from a position of sympathy.

Working from a self-constructed canon of 193 films—which he knows well enough to draw many precise statistical conclusions about the frequency of this theme or that narrative turn—King places cop-action heroics against the backdrop of what he calls "lost ground." Basically, this characterizes the middle-class white man's sense of outraged priv-

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By Neal King. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1999. $59.50 cloth; $19.95 paper.

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Which is partly why King's study is good to read. In fact, it might prove *most* enlightening to those of us who have tended to disdain this impoverished, headachey genre. In straight-talk prose, King takes account of the prejudices many readers will bring to his subject; certainly he can't be accused of sidestepping the toughest objections to these movies. In successive chapters he regards them through prisms of gender, race, and economics; the longest chapter is on the symbolism of sodomy. He quotes a host of critics' complaints about racism, misogyny, and homophobia, and allows them their validity. But he is explicit in offering an alternative to standard interpretations of the genre's recurring themes and dynamics—essentially, that they support white male hegemony and enforce the subjugation of women and ethnic minorities. Against each detraction he formulates a genre-inclusive reading which tends to give "cop action" (his designation) the benefit of every doubt. Readily admitting that he derives enjoyment and even an "erotic rush" from "fire storms, fist fights, and car chases" (175), King does not defend cop action so much as seek thematic coherence from a position of sympathy.

Working from a self-constructed canon of 193 films—which he knows well enough to draw many precise statistical conclusions about the frequency of this theme or that narrative turn—King places cop-action heroics against the backdrop of what he calls "lost ground." Basically, this characterizes the middle-class white man's sense of outraged priv-

ilege and anger at the perceived encroach of minorities and women, and his sense of impotence in an atmosphere of shrinking economic possibilities and declining respect for skill-specific labor. King reads the ostentatious misery of the genre (self-loathing heroes, excruciating violence) as the white hero's furious, fatalistic response to his own marginalization: a willfully obnoxious, gratuitously bloody assertion of pissed-off identity. "[These heroes] did not choose lost ground, but they merrily escalate the conflict, reshaping their own, more heroic, hard times" (197).

The book has a narrow range, in the sense that (to quote its author, who again preempts criticism) it "steers clear of 'why' questions for the most part, hesitating to ponder the push and pull between the United States and the cop action world" (209). This evasion is not insignificant, since it means that films separated by ten or fifteen years are probed for their social implications as if they were the products of the same social conditions. Relevant questions leap from this void—such as why Hollywood cop action was particularly popular in the Reagan 80s, not a notably harrowing time for white men; and why stars like Stallone and Schwarzenegger have been largely unable to reproduce that success in Clinton's America. In film-historical terms, King briefly sketches the modern cop hero's archetypal roots in the Western, post-war noir, and the cop actioners of the late 60s and early 70s, but the book needs to convey a sense of how the modern cop hero differs from earlier incarnations of angry white manhood—how his "hard times" are unique from theirs.

As a genre revisionist, King is not always convincing. In a chapter called "Rage of the Oppressed," he concludes that white cop heroes' proximity to minority sidekicks shows the disaffiliated white worker drawn osmotically to "models of rage," from whom he can derive "free therapy" (99). Therefore the Dirty Harry series, in successive installments of which Clint Eastwood was partnered with a Hispanic, a black, and a woman (each of whom wound up either maimed or dead), depicts a sort of post-Fiedler pairing of a white outcast with the Other. As a reading this may not be wrong, but it doesn't overturn the larger objection: that these movies employ their non-white second bananas mainly to impart minority "credibility" to the hero while assisting him in his righteous purgation, at which point they are erased from whatever fictive world will obtain when the movie is over. This strategy allows white male viewers a light snack of Otherness without the possible stomach upset of full identification. King works hard to rationalize the sidekick-therapist trope as more than a plot device and empty gesture at inclusion—he even admits it is "What bothers me most about this genre" (99)—but he is defeated by the visceral evidence on the screen.

Many of King's oppositional readings, though, are strikingly original, and these are what give the book its substance. The conventional view is that cop action's anally-fixated profanity and phallic gunplay bespeak the simmering and rampant homosexuality intrinsic to the genre. But King infers that in these films homoerotic violence and language do not symbolize gay desire, in a way they are another, unacknowledged *kind* of gay desire—an inherently violent, politically frustrated straight man's queer aspect taking its most natural if crudest form—and therefore not a sublimation at all: "Rather than stand in for taboo embraces, body slams and beatings provide the embraces cops want" (174).

Even better is King's interpretation of the typical cop action climax. He details how movies like *Cobra* and *Cop* culminate with the hero outraging legal protocol to vanquish the villain, either summarily or, more often, by the most photogenically gruesome means available. Again, King challenges the presumption that such victories are intended to affirm our old pal, white patriarchal order. These heroes, he believes, are affirming nothing but the psychosis inherent in the brutal game they play. Cop action's natural climax is anchored not in the moral certitude that white makes right, but in "the thrill of surrender to white-boy brutality" and the "mass of beefy, murderous bodies" (200) that piles up as the hero works out his social and sexual frustrations. The climactic tantrums "may begin as debates over legal authority and systems of justice, but they end with wailing men on hooks buttfucked for good" (195).

Such perceptions have value not because they are correct but because they are legitimately arguable. King doesn't come close to resolving every contradiction of the genre—who *could* untangle such a rat's nest?—nor does he make a single claim for cop action as movie art. But he does offer provocative, well-supported opinions in accessible language, and there is little more we can ask of film analysis right now. King's victory is the at least partial recuperation of a genre whose soul seemed long ago to have been divvied up by the twin devils of Mammon and the NRA. His failure—if failure it be—is that I still never want to see another Stephen Seagal movie, ever.

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Ingmar Bergman's Persona

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For almost a decade now Ingmar Bergman seems to have been "somewhat out of favor among many young scholars." The six essays found in Lloyd Michaels' anthology, *Ingmar Bergman's Persona,* may signal a change. Michaels offers them as "new critical approaches" to what is certainly one of the greatest and "most complex films ever made." (He also reprints Susan Sontag's influential 1967 essay, "Bergman's *Persona,*" long available in her book *Styles of Radical Will.*) In his introduction, "Bergman and the Necessary Illusion," Michaels speculates on the reasons behind this recent, diminished interest in Bergman's films, provides a very brief biography of the filmmaker, and offers a discussion of *Persona*'s genesis as well as of approaches to interpreting this difficult film. At the end of the volume he

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usefully gives an up-to-date filmography and reprints of contemporary reviews of the film.

In the first essay, "Bergman's *Persona* Through a Native Mindscape," Birgitta Steene argues that ultimately Bergman's "aesthetic vision" owes more to his "indigenous Swedish mindscape" than to international artistic influences. His desire to push beyond the conventions of naturalistic dramaturgy (established by American realistic cinema) parallels similar struggles by earlier Swedish filmmakers Victor Sjöström and Alf Sjöberg and, most importantly, by Bergman's favorite writer, August Strindberg. Addressing the two plays of Strindberg's, *The Stronger* and *A Dreamplay,* that are recognized as influencing *Persona,* Steene focuses on Strindberg's shifting from "logically conceived dramaturgy" in the former to a "more subjective, associative and fluid dramaturgy" in the latter. Near the end of her essay, after she reminds us that Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* ends with the grandmother of Bergman's youthful alter ego reading to him the preface to *A Dreamplay,* the parallel she is making with Strindberg seems forced.

In the preface Strindberg sets forth his purpose to create a drama in which a realistic mise-en-scène and a dreamlike state of mind coexist. He talks of creating "an all-encompassing dreamer consciousness that hovers over the dramatic action." In the play it is Indra's father, "whose voice is heard in the prologue, but who never appears in the dramatic story." Steene uses this conception to explore the question of whose "fantasy" we are watching in *Persona.* She settles on the "enigmatic" boy, who only appears in the film's opening and closing sequences, arguing that like Indra's father, he becomes the Bergmanian illusionist "who transforms dead material into live images, which in turn initiate the master narrative." This function is symbolized, Steene says, in the boy's hands, which move wand-like "across the screen door" on which appear alternating images of Alma/Bibi Andersson and Elizabet/Liv Ullmann and which soon becomes a hospital door, the entry into the narrative. The image of a little child's hands moving wand-like before an unseen object does appear in a single earlier shot in the film's opening montage, but the gesture that Steene describes does not support her characterization. The boy's arm is extended in front of him with his hand's open palm, fingers extended, reaching out to touch or press against the image of the women's alternating faces. Nor does this interpretation satisfactorily account for the film's ending, which shows the apparently still unsatisfied boy still reaching for the elusive women.

In contrast to Steene's citing of Bergman's Swedish artistic roots, Wheeler Winston Dixon's "*Persona* and the 1960s Art Cinema" points to the influence on *Persona* of New and post-New Wave filmmakers, in particular Jean-Luc Godard's work of the early to middle 1960s. They inspired Bergman to "reinvent himself." He appeared, says Dixon, "anew on the cinematic landscape with an entirely new visual style, a more sophisticated and minimalist sense of décor, and a modernist intensity of purpose." These directors, he adds, also provided Bergman with the impetus to move from the studio to out-of-doors. In addition to embracing the "cinematic minimalism" of the likes of Straub, Fassbinder, and Warhol, Bergman's style changed because he began to shoot his films in "the isolation of [the] uninhabited space" of Fårö (his austere, island home),which provided "a minimalist sense of spatial integrity." All this is well said. Less supportable is Dixon's discussion of *Persona*'s theme, which he says is "domesticity gone awry," and which draws on Bergman's "long relationship" with Liv Ullmann. The problem is that Bergman had only recently met the young actress.

Christopher Orr also sees *Persona* as a product of the 1960s film culture, but he examines it from the perspective of genre. Asserting that "most of Bergman's films" are melodramas, a form that he believes addresses social issues, he reads *Persona* politically, arguing that because Elizabet is a member of Sweden's cultural elite, Alma's reactions to her, besides "raising the issue of the fragile nature of personal identity, can also be understood as class envy and exploitation." Key to his interpretation is Elizabet's celebrity status and Alma's early statement that if she wanted, she could change into the actress. This interpretation may not persuade all readers, but it does produce a dividend by helping to explain the meaning of the enigmatic word "nothing" (*ingenting*), which, near the end of the film, Alma gets the silent Elizabet to utter. For Orr, this word (also repeatedly used in *The Seventh Seal*) "connotes the existential angst mem-

bers of the cultural elite feel in confronting a universe they perceive as meaningless and absurd. Alma's knowledge of this class has reached a point where she is able to appropriate its language."

Orr is also intent on qualifying Robin Wood's and Susan Sontag's assertions that the self-reflexivity of *Persona* is not Godardian or Brechtian. He cites examples of distanciation in which either a breaking of the narrative or the set design provokes the audience into reflecting on larger contexts. Here not all of his evidence is convincing. His selection of the passage when the projector breaks down in the middle of the film—the film seems to jump off the sprockets, rip, and burn—does not represent, at least my experience, how audiences react. At that moment, people are so involved in figuring out if the film really has been damaged (I have seen individuals turn and look up toward the projection booth) that only the question of what is happening occupies their thoughts. However, the scene in which Alma's monologue about Elizabet's pregnancy and subsequent aversion to her son is repeated does cause us to experience "a genuine Brechtian moment" in which we become aware of "the text as a constructed object." Orr's examples of distanciation created by set design—the figurehead of a woman which compositionally dwarfs Alma as she leaves the summer house for the last time, the lack of continuity in what is shown behind Elizabet when she slaps Alma, and the "nothing" scene mentioned above—likewise induce reflection. In the last example, however, Orr taints his point by not recognizing that what is happening is still part of Alma's dream, which organizes the second half of the film.

In "*Persona* and the Seduction of Performance," Steve Vineberg recounts the events in *Smiles of a Summer Night* to establish how, before *Persona,* Bergman used "theatrical devices and performance styles" to convey theme and to develop character. He then argues that the "self-consciousness about creating film" seen in *Persona*'s opening and closing scenes, "is sustained throughout . . . through the related theme of performance," through Elizabet Vogler's naturalistic miming and Alma's monologues. Bergman's method of working in *Persona* is so stripped down that it compels us, Vineberg contends, to heed the acting, which, puzzlingly, he judges reaches heights "none of [Bergman's] earlier films hint at except, indirectly, *Smiles of a Summer Night.*" Vineberg's approach is that the film is, "on one level, an extended series of acting exercises" (e.g., "the mirror exercise"). The "acting process . . . is inseparable from the interaction of the two characters; the movie is . . . centrally about the seduction and power of acting." Though the actors' performances can be seen as "naked" exercises, seeing them that way does not sufficiently alter our, or at least this reviewer's, understanding of the acting dynamics or much enrich the scenes Vineberg analyzes. Trust in his approach is further weakened by his misrepresentation of some of the scenes he treats. In the film's opening sequence, for example, he describes the young boy's reaching out to Liv Ullmann's face, when actually, as I indicated earlier, her face repeatedly alternates with Bibi Andersson's; and in the scene in which Mr. Vogler appears in Alma's dream, it is clearly Alma who is (or is trying to be) in control, not Elizabet. Alma keeps turning from Mr. Vogler to see what the effect is on Elizabet of what she is saying to the latter's husband.

It is a somewhat different definition of performance that Gwendolyn Foster explores in "Feminist Theory and Lesbian Desire in *Persona,*" which applies performance theory and lesbian feminist theory to the story. Her aim is to shift "the ground under heterosexually defined notions of the symbolic order of 'the' phallus, as well as 'the' Oedipus and Electra complex." *Persona,* she finds, "is centrally concerned with the performance of lesbian desire." Admitting she is "highly aware" that her readings are "a projection and coproduction of meaning," Foster proposes that sexuality between Alma and Elizabet, though "never directly consummated, . . . is informed by a radical refashioning . . . through a queer gaze." This analysis especially marks her treatment of the beach scene narrated by Alma. In it Alma and a stranger named Katarina, both sunbathing naked, have sex with two young boys. Foster argues that the two women indirectly are having sex with each other through the "conduit" of the boys. But Foster's following point undermines this assertion. She argues that Alma's telling Elizabet this story becomes "a copy of the scene on the beach, culminating in an orgasm in Elizabet, who immediately lights up a cigarette in a postcoital performance of sexual satiation." There is no evidence in the scene, however, to support these assertions, not even the dividend cigarette, since Elizabet smokes on and off throughout the scene.

While the five essays reviewed here will help viewers of the film to "a more comprehensive understanding of Bergman's achievement," they also remind one of Pauline Kael's observation, which appears in one of the four contemporary reviews of *Persona* that Michaels reprints: "It may be that an open puzzle movie like this one . . . permits [some people] to project into it so much of themselves that what they think the movie is about has very little to do with what happens on the screen."

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L'Argent

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James Monaco has brilliantly described the late Robert Bresson as an "ascetic aesthete." Bresson did indeed combine an asceticism—the eschewal of both the alien and the inessential, such as acting and expressionistic camerawork—with an aestheticism—an intense yet calm concentration on objects and sounds presented in a precise order and with a certain rhythm—to astonishingly and subtly evoke a sense of the cryptic that permeates the cosmos. In a 1970 interview

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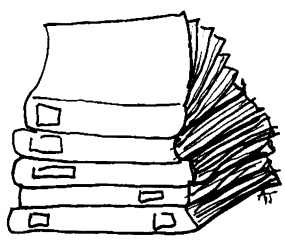
with Charles Samuels, Bresson put it this way: "The unknown is what I wish to capture." *L'Argent,* his last film and his masterpiece, certainly deserves a book-length analysis, but this one, while having real strengths, is, in my judgement, less than adequate.

The book's description and discussion of the supreme sensuousness of Bresson's images is generally intelligent and sensitive. The author's ideas on the painterly rhythm with which the images are presented are quite thought-provoking. Jones is also good on how the glances of various characters are used by Bresson to tie them to one another and to objects. However, when Jones notes the extensive use of sound bridging ("bringing up the sound from the following scene") and mentions how common this is in mainstream cinema and wonders why its use in *L'Argent* seems "artisanal," it seems a rather seriously incomplete appreciation. Had Jones paid more attention to Bresson's asceticism, particularly to his basing his films (as the filmmaker himself has written) upon white and silence, some more fruitful analysis of the resulting artisanal character of the sound bridges in *L'Argent* would have been possible.

The book's consideration of theme is rather unsatisfying, in part because the author insists on imposing a psychological interpretation on the protagonist Yvon Targe's relationship with his final murder victim, when Bresson's films are notorious for providing no basis for any such definitive interpretations. Another misstep, in my opinion, is Jones' treatment of a speech from Targe's cell mate, in which the latter declares that the social order is absurd, as is the idea of universal happiness, and that he seeks only his own happiness. The cell mate addresses money as "*dieu visible*" (visible god), which Jones curiously translates as "our false god." He regards the speech as mere hectoring, when it is, I believe, an important statement that could have led to a worthwhile discussion of whether and, if so, how Bresson evokes in *L'Argent* a sense of unknown invisible realities different from, and perhaps in opposition to, the "visible god" money.

Jones rightly devotes much space to the final portion of the film, when Targe is released from prison and goes on two murder sprees. Yet it is perhaps the weakest section of the book. The final shot in a Bresson film is always terribly important because the precisely interlinked images and sounds can at last be seen as a whole. At the end, police lead a handcuffed Targe out of the bar in which he confessed to the murders, past a crowd of spectators waiting outside the door of the bar, and then off screen. Mr. Jones does not mention the striking, even strange, fact that the crowd does not turn to watch Targe but remains transfixed, continuing to stare into the bar he has left, something that powerfully affects the film's ending.



It seems to me that the fundamental flaw of this study is not that it gives too much attention to the aesthetic, sensuous aspects of Bresson's filmmaking (it does not), but that it gives far too little to the ascetic, minimalistic ones. While the author sincerely admires Robert Bresson, even regarding him as a singular filmmaker, he is utterly dismissive both of Bresson's claim that he practiced the authentic, pure way of filmmaking and of the idea that Bresson is "a rather daunting figure with a purchase on ultimate reality." Of course Jones' tendency to downplay the asceticism of Bresson's art has the effect of largely leaving the field to a (distorted version of) Bressonian aestheticism, hence tending to make the director's achievement, however, marvellous, seem not all that different from that of other filmmakers. Kent Jones fails, I think, to realize that, precisely because Bresson's aestheticism is ascetic, his mature films do not merely achieve beauty, but go beyond it, to a place where cinema can go but to which other filmmakers do not take it—to the profound realm of the unknown.

Shmuel Ben-Gad is a librarian at George Washington University whose three bibliographies on works by and about Robert Bresson have appeared in the *Bulletin of Bibliography.*

Lawrence of Arabia

A Film's Anthropology

Steven C. Caton. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999. $50.00 cloth; $19.95 paper.

Lawrence of Arabia is the film against which all others are measured. This "personal epic" achieved what no other grand film of the late 50s and early 60s could: it created a protagonist who was accessible on an individual level, yet who operated within an epic sphere. For many scholars writing today, *Lawrence* appeared just as they were becoming serious about film. Its return from relative obscurity via Robert Harris and James Katz's 1989 restoration brought it back in a way that few would have imagined possible. By then, going to see *Lawrence* had become something of a hajj.

The director's cut that played in 1989 was not the full-length version that premiered in 1962. Harris and Katz allowed Lean to recut the film while it was being restored. (In fact, the restoration is six minutes shorter than the original.) Moreover, the argument that the film's shortened version did not reflect Lean's final intentions is untrue. Responding to worries about the film's length, Lean himself trimmed it. Nonetheless, regardless of which version one sees, *Lawrence* creates more visceral cinematic pleasure than any other film. I therefore approached Steven Caton's book with great anticipation. Regrettably, it promises much but doesn't always deliver. He proposes to place the film in an anthropological context, in which attempt he is mostly suc-

with Charles Samuels, Bresson put it this way: "The unknown is what I wish to capture." *L'Argent,* his last film and his masterpiece, certainly deserves a book-length analysis, but this one, while having real strengths, is, in my judgement, less than adequate.

The book's description and discussion of the supreme sensuousness of Bresson's images is generally intelligent and sensitive. The author's ideas on the painterly rhythm with which the images are presented are quite thought-provoking. Jones is also good on how the glances of various characters are used by Bresson to tie them to one another and to objects. However, when Jones notes the extensive use of sound bridging ("bringing up the sound from the following scene") and mentions how common this is in mainstream cinema and wonders why its use in *L'Argent* seems "artisanal," it seems a rather seriously incomplete appreciation. Had Jones paid more attention to Bresson's asceticism, particularly to his basing his films (as the filmmaker himself has written) upon white and silence, some more fruitful analysis of the resulting artisanal character of the sound bridges in *L'Argent* would have been possible.

The book's consideration of theme is rather unsatisfying, in part because the author insists on imposing a psychological interpretation on the protagonist Yvon Targe's relationship with his final murder victim, when Bresson's films are notorious for providing no basis for any such definitive interpretations. Another misstep, in my opinion, is Jones' treatment of a speech from Targe's cell mate, in which the latter declares that the social order is absurd, as is the idea of universal happiness, and that he seeks only his own happiness. The cell mate addresses money as "*dieu visible*" (visible god), which Jones curiously translates as "our false god." He regards the speech as mere hectoring, when it is, I believe, an important statement that could have led to a worthwhile discussion of whether and, if so, how Bresson evokes in *L'Argent* a sense of unknown invisible realities different from, and perhaps in opposition to, the "visible god" money.

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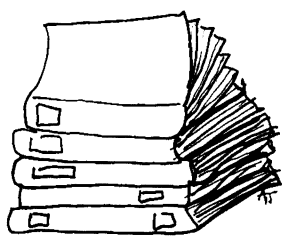

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cessful. But the author's cinematic analysis leaves a great deal to be desired. One of the problems is Caton's critical approach: he proposes that *Lawrence* reflects its director's biographical details and psychology. But this method is rife with reductionist potential.

Caton's analysis also stumbles because of his admittedly speculative stance. In one paragraph, the alternation between assertion and speculation is vertiginous.

> In his direction, Lean may have fixated on this scene between Auda and his boy, which he redid many times in part because of his own psychological needs, but we will never know this. Nor do I wish to suggest that he intended this scene to be read in the ways I have chosen. I am suggesting that in watching his own film, the scene would no doubt have a certain poignancy for Lean . . . and that men in the audience . . . might fixate on it as well.

Additionally, Caton often sets up an analytical structure, only to abandon it when it doesn't apply to the entirety of a scene's essential elements. In his analysis of the scene in Feisal's tent with Lawrence and Feisal, for instance, Caton points to the fact that when Feisal is in the background, out of focus, and Lawrence is in the foreground, in focus, Feisal seems to be acting as Lawrence's subconscious. Yet when their positions are reversed, Caton does not assert that the opposite proposition is true, probably because it does not seem to be, even though the analytical structure he has set up compels him to acknowledge (and, ideally, deal with) this lapse in critical parallelism.

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The Magnificent Ambersons

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At the onset of his delicately crafted study, V. F. Perkins declares that he will concentrate mostly on the 88-minute version of *The Magnificent Ambersons* released by RKO, rather than on what was lost or changed from Orson Welles' original 131-minute film. In this way he refuses to compose a dirge on sound film's great mutilated masterpiece, choosing instead to write a critical evaluation of one of "cinema's glories." He argues that even as it stands, this 1942 family melodrama is "packed with wonders," for it contains "as many marvelous shots, scenes, ideas, performances as most film-makers could hope to achieve in an entire career."

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In "Must We Say What They Mean?: Film Criticism and Interpretation" (1991), Perkins wrote that insofar as interpretation "hopes to illuminate a whole film or body of work by drawing attention to overall patterns and representatively eloquent detail, an important test of its validity and usefulness will be the degree to which we can internalize it and use it to enrich our contact with the film." He achieves this, the most successful criterion of critical endeavor, in his reading of *The Magnificent Ambersons* by taking contemporary film studies' least-traveled road: aesthetics. Such an approach is perfect for Welles' film for, to borrow from Frederick Turner, beauty is the most non-utopian of ideals because it is the one quality that can tolerate tragedy.

Tragedy is not only associated with the film's postproduction history (and the breakup of the legendary Mercury Theatre), but exists in ever-widening circles within the narrative's major and minor story elements and characters. As Perkins states, its plot is so colored by tragedy— the decline of a great family's fortunes, lives ruined by the destructive bond between an arrogant son and his self-sacrificing mother—that no one with any business sense would have risked adapting Booth Tarkington's novel to the screen. Aside from the embarrassing studio-imposed happy ending, the plot is specifically one "of failure and frustration; its key events are deaths, and disappointments passively endured." Or to put it as James Naremore does, "Loneliness pervades the [film's] entire world. Everyone has become a prisoner of class or sex, a citizen of a town Lucy whimsically names 'They-Couldn't-Help-It.'" Perkins sees that the film's core preoccupation with (and critique of) momism would make spectators uncomfortable, even hostile. Thus as Andrew Sarris remarks, the movie feels like two texts: "one commercially misguided, the other artistically sublime."

Semiotics, psychoanalysis, formalism, and cultural studies may be helpful tools to aid in analyzing a film, but they are of no use in an exploration of the artistically sublime. Each lacks the range and vocabulary—not to mention the interest—necessary for discussing an experience of, say, awe, nobility, or impending doom which a movie might inspire. Noël Carroll has explained that film studies tends to regard questions of aesthetic quality, other than functioning as sociological data used to ascertain the formation of taste in viewers, as little more than displays of "primitive mysticism." Perkins' writing must therefore be as woolly as it is reactionary; yet his work here (as elsewhere) simply proves otherwise. On the contrary: the incisive manner with which he explores thematic connections through close textual analysis, authorial considerations, and historical context, and consequently the way he explores the design of men and women as each moves within a film's world, is second to none. (An exception is his reading of *In a Lonely Place,* in which he blames much of Dixon Steele's abuse toward Laurel Gray on the victim herself, rather than seeing the film as a portrait of the illusions and negotiations women attracted to violent men put themselves through.)

Consider, for example, Perkins' finely honed description of the sad figure of Aunt Fanny ("The fear of the world's mockery forbids direct expression of her most vital thoughts so that she is constrained to a deviousness by which she herself is humbled"), or his succinct analysis of the meaning produced by the camera's static placement in the scene involving Lucy, Eugene, and Uncle Jack:

> The scene is holdingly, heart-breakingly quiet, visually as well as on the ear. The care put into the exercise of tact lets us see how embarrassed is the avoidance of embarrassment, but also how delicate is the mutual concern of these friends. Most of all the rigid frame gives an image of the paralysis in which the events are held. Submission to George, to Isabel's submission to George, has created a deadlock that only death will break.

Here displayed, as in all of Perkins' work going back to the 60s journal *Movie* and his classic book of theory, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (1972), is a style of expression committed to clarity. Refreshingly absent are items from the list of faults George Orwell cited as debasing language by corrupting critical thinking: the use of dead metaphors, borrowings, archaisms, jargon, meaningless words, and ready-made phrases. This extract also shows clarity of perception: The eight-page examination of *Psycho*'s shower scene in *Film as Film* is the most famous example of Perkins' writing, but his analysis of the Linz sequence in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (from the 1982 article of the same name) is his greatest tour-de-force. Due to the consistently high quality of his reading on Welles' film, it is difficult to choose which part of this 77-page book best illustrates Perkins' signature clarity. Perhaps for me the high point would be his penetrating breakdown of the complex scene in which Eugene responds to George's rude assertion that "Automobiles are a useless nuisance" (54ff). However, even the cover photo (from the ball sequence where George is introduced to Eugene for the first time at the same moment as Eugene re-enters Isabel's life) is a superb example of Perkins' critical sensibility. A more sexy photo could have been selected (such as the stylized shot of George's face reflected on the left side of the frame as he stares down at Eugene, who is featured on the right). Instead, what was chosen neatly captures the main character tensions competing in the film.

There is much to savor in this slim volume. Whether it regards long overdue appreciation ("Very few actors could have given a performance as unselfish as Tim Holt's, and very few directors would have asked for it"), some splendid mini-essays on the long take and the relationship of sound to image, or the way it is shown how Welles (unlike Eisenstein) constructs a "world in argument with his claims," Welles' creation may at last boast one unvarnished triumph: Perkins' attentive sense of its beauty amid so much pain and loss.

Jeff Crouse, a film lecturer and freelance critic, is a doctoral graduate from the University of Warwick, where he studied under Richard Dyer.

Storytelling in the New Hollywood

Understanding Classical Narrative Technique

By Kristin Thompson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. $49.95 cloth; $24.95, paper.

In this book Kristin Thompson extends the work she initiated, along with David Bordwell and Janet Staiger, in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. She does this by describing contemporary Hollywood's most important and typical narrative strategies, then by offering analyses of ten films to illustrate how those strategies are used in practice. The book is also polemical in its contentions that (1) contrary to claims about a significantly different "post-classical" or "post-Hollywood" cinema, narrative strategies have changed little from the studio era, and that (2) some of the most popular screenwriting manuals actually get basic Hollywood narrative structure wrong. *Storytelling in the New Hollywood* is a significant accomplishment and an essential volume for anyone who wishes to understand how Hollywood films tell stories. It also promises to expand and initiate debate about the nature of contemporary Hollywood and its narrative strategies.

The Classical Hollywood Cinema, published in 1985, describes the norms of classical filmmaking between the years of 1917 and 1960, leaving open questions about the nature of Hollywood filmmaking after 1960. Are the norms of contemporary Hollywood filmmaking significantly different from those of the studio era? Near the end of the 1985 book, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson write that Hollywood had assimilated "art cinema" conventions in the late 60s and into the 70s; some films had imitated the reflexivity and look of European films, and the cult of the director had become pronounced. On the other hand, these influences were tempered by a conservative style and the need to fit films into conventional genres. The authors conclude that the "New Hollywood" did explore narrational ambiguity (as in the art cinema), but that those explorations remained within classical boundaries.

Writing almost fifteen years later, Thompson now concludes that "the youthquake/auteurist films of the period from 1969 to 1977 or so were not harbingers of a profound shift in Hollywood storytelling but a brief detour that has had a lingering effect on industry practice" (4). First, Thompson writes, the success of these films convinced executives that the auteur label could be beneficial to marketing. Second, the auteur generation's awareness of classical Hollywood had a "retro" effect on filmmaking, leading to a "juvenilization" of American cinema. Despite these changes, Thompson argues, the "ideal American film still centers around a well-structured, carefully motivated series of events that the spectator can comprehend relatively easily" (9). This brief period of auteurism had an impact on the Hollywood industry, but failed to alter classical storytelling significantly.

After making the claim that there have been no significant changes in Hollywood storytelling conventions, Thompson briefly describes those conventions as techniques of progression (cause and effect), clarity, and unity. As part of her research, Thompson examined those ubiquitous contemporary screenwriting manuals. The most interesting claim in this respect is that "by the mid-1990s some of the more formulaic advice of such manuals was actually having a negative effect on the films coming out of Hollywood" (11). Most importantly, Thompson cites Syd Field's 1979 book, *Screenplay*, as having popularized the idea of the three-act structure in screenplay form. Field writes that the screenplay should be structured as three acts temporally proportioned at 1/4 – 1/2 –1/4. The problem with this model, Thompson writes, is that "no one seems to know what 'middle' means for a film plot" (25). In addition, she argues that such formulas are often too rigidly based on page numbers in the script rather than dramatic logic, and do not recognize that Aristotle's recommendation of a beginning, middle, and end need not, and typically does not, result in a three-act structure.

One of the important arguments of *Storytelling in the New Hollywood* is that most films can best be broken down into four, rather than three, large-scale parts, with major turning points located at the transitions. Thompson refers to these parts as the setup, the complicating action, the development, and the climax. Her point is not that films must strictly adhere to this structure to be "good." Rather, she wishes to introduce these concepts as analytical tools that highlight "patterns of character change, theme, and plot trajectories" (212). Very briefly, the setup establishes the initial situation, and the complicating action takes the action in a new direction, either by having the protagonist follow a goal established in the setup, or "building a whole new situation with which the protagonist must cope" (28). By the time of the complicating action, the goals, complications, and obstacles of the story have been firmly established, and the protagonist here struggles to attain her or his goals. When all goals and lines of action have been introduced, the climax typically begins, taking us toward final resolution. The most contentious claim here is Thompson's breaking of Field's long second act into two acts, the complicating action and development. As Thompson notes, Field himself has recently established a "mid-point" during the long second act, but has not relinquished the three-act structure with which he has become associated.

After a clear and useful introduction, Thompson analyses ten films, all of which received a good deal of critical acclaim and popular success. These are *Tootsie, Back to the Future, The Silence of the Lambs, Groundhog Day, Desperately Seeking Susan, Amadeus, The Hunt for Red October, Parenthood, Alien,* and *Hannah and Her Sisters*. Her main purpose here, and one she fulfills completely, is to show that classical storytelling techniques are still very much with us. In each of these chapters she analyzes the film's setup, complicating action, development, and climax. In addition, she uses each analysis as an opportunity to explore particular issues suggested by the peculiarities of the film

in question. *Tootsie,* for example, shows that Hollywood characters typically change gradually, and then most often acquire desirable traits which they maintain until the narrative's end. Shifting or evolving character goals are the norm, Thompson writes, and "the fact that screenplay advisers seem to conceive of goals as static may suggest a further reason why they often see the central portion of the film as an hour-long 'act' which they find difficult to write, define, or analyze" (52). *Back to the Future,* she says, contradicts another myth propounded by too many manuals, that "exposition is innately bad and should be minimized" (99). *Amadeus* demonstrates the flexibility characteristic of the Hollywood tradition, in this case its ability to assimilate art cinema techniques within an overarching classical narration. In *Parenthood* we see that the classical system of storytelling continues to rely on "character traits as the main source of motivation for narrative events" (282).

The final two analyses in the book, of *Alien* and *Hannah and Her Sisters,* both foreground unpredictability as a central storytelling device. Audiences will never again experience *Alien* as they did during its initial 1979 release, in part because we know that Sigourney Weaver is a star and thus most likely to survive the film's "shooting-gallery" plot. Thompson shows that both suspense and surprise in this film require creating a balance among the characters, so that the spectator continues to believe that Ripley is as vulnerable to the attack of the alien as the other crew members. This is achieved in part through casting, but also through cinematography and mise-en-scène. Thompson takes some time here to bemoan the contemporary trend toward increasing the level of action, as in *Alien Resurrection*: "A constant barrage of high action leaves little room for exposition, motifs, humor, subplots, character development, and the many other components of well-balanced classical narratives. Such concentration on action does not represent a 'post-classical' approach so much as incompetence" (306).

The thematic premise of *Hannah and Her Sisters* is that love is unpredictable. The film makes unpredictability the central focus of its narrative, Thompson writes, by "balancing protagonists against one another" (308), refusing to single out certain characters as more or as less important. Thompson ends this chapter with her estimation of Woody Allen, whom she finds, given his control of his films, autobiographical concerns, and stylistic experiments, to be "as close to an auteur as anyone who has worked in the American cinema during recent decades" (331).

Thompson concludes by reiterating the purpose of the ten film analyses. She avoids "the sort of thematic interpretation that prevails in academic film criticism" (335) because finding "messages" in films, such as "Jealousy is self-destructive" in the case of *Amadeus,* "does little to explain how popular cinema provides viewers with engaging experiences" (335). The kind of interpretation that abstracts thematic ideas from films does not show us "how films operate as coherent wholes, shaping and developing their subject matter in ways that hold audiences" (335). Those who value interpretation might respond that good interpretive analysis does not "message monger," as though each film were merely an extended Aesop's fable with a pat moral, but rather pays close attention to how films work on us rhetorically. With regard to *The Silence of the Lambs,* for example, we might notice that Lecter and Crawford share a curious relationship with Clarice Starling—as alternative but paralleled mentors, father figures, even potential suitors. That the two are so paired is demonstrated in many ways. In both cases, the men assist Starling in her career and, it is implied, are possibly attracted to her. Most noticeably and powerfully, such pairing is demonstrated by intense conversations presented in intimate shot/reverse shot structures, and also by the physical contact Starling has with each man when saying farewell. This comes in the form of a hand caress (in Lecter's case) and a handshake (with Crawford), each foregrounded in extreme close-up. To my mind, this odd and complex dynamic escapes formal analysis, and has more to do with the power and ambiguity of human relationships. This is the sort of dynamic that interpretation must often tease out.

The kind of formal analysis Thompson presents, with its careful attention to structure and its refusal to take received wisdom for granted, is nonetheless a vital element of any film analysis. *Storytelling in the New Hollywood* concludes with Thompson's reiteration of and further argument for her major premise. The classical approach to narrative has not been replaced by a new model: "It has just not been as well applied recently as it had been in years past" (337). Part of the problem could be with the influence that screenwriting manuals and courses are having on the studio's methods of choosing scripts. "Remarkably," Thompson writes, "a group of people, almost none of whom have ever authored a major feature film, have propagated a set of guidelines that anxious producers and writers alike seem to have taken as inviolable formulas" (339).

Thompson claims that the changes visible in the "New Hollywood," including "high concept," fragmentation of markets, and the need to reach niche audiences, are merely intensifications of tendencies already present in Hollywood early on. As she writes, the "very fact that classical standards have endured in most well-made, well-regarded films despite the pressures of the need to appeal to niche audiences strongly suggests that the classical paradigm remains robust" (346). Whatever one's perspective on these issues, Kristin Thompson's latest book should become a centerpiece in the study of contemporary Hollywood and its storytelling techniques.

Carl Plantinga teaches at Calvin College, in Michigan.

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The films of Chantal Akerman have had a profound impact on both feminist filmmaking discourse and avant-garde cinema. In works such as *Ju tu il elle* (1974), *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978), *Histoires d'Amérique* (1989) and *D'Est* (1993), Akerman has continued to create new and unexpected films which explore ideas about the image, the gaze, space, performance and narration, and shown herself to be an uncompromising and dedicated practitioner of the cinema.

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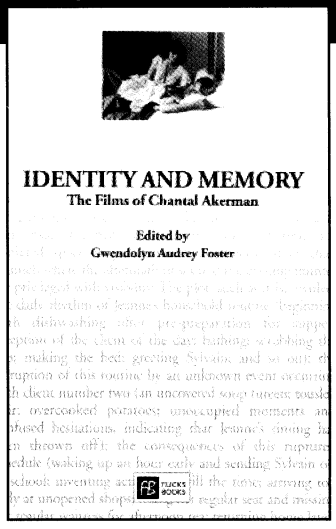

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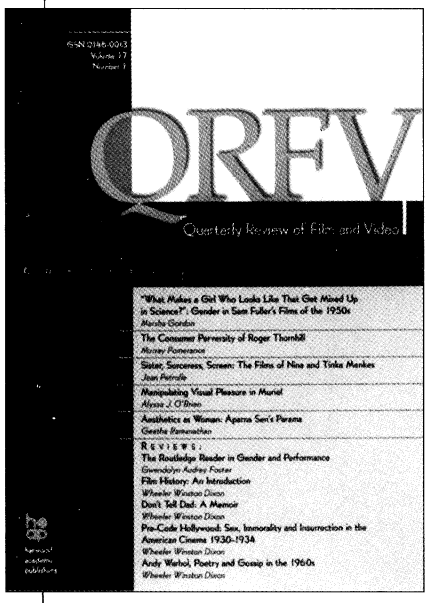

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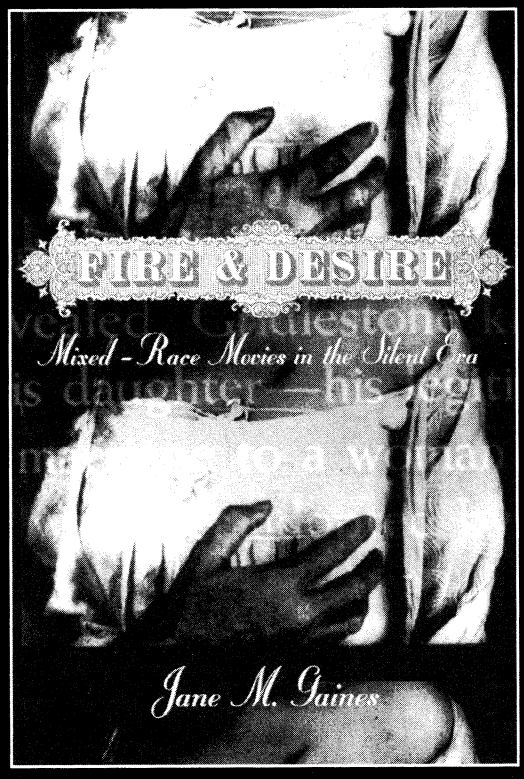

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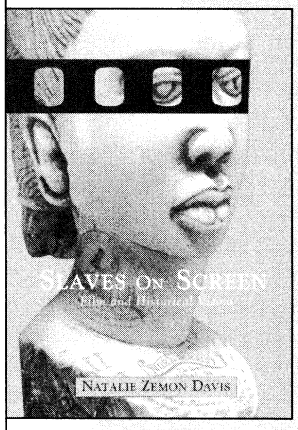

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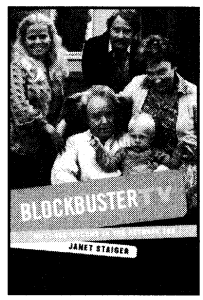

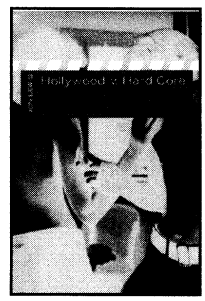

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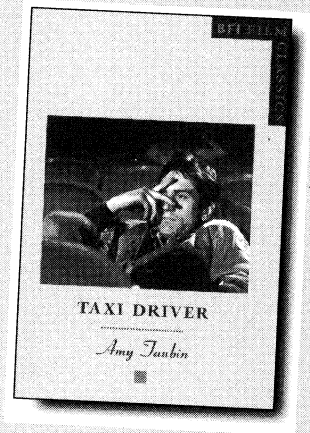

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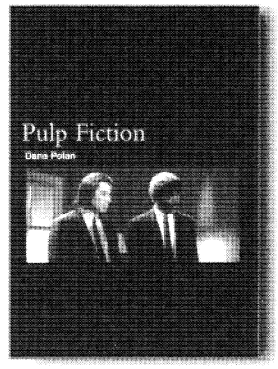

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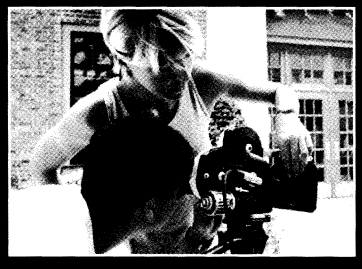

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